The Nation.

SPRING BOOKS

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LETTERS

CHRISTOPH NIEMANN

ISAAC B. SINGER & G.G.

Shaker Heights, Ohio

■ A half-century ago, I discovered Graham Greene and Isaac Bashevis Singer at about the same time. I got the feeling that I was reading two interchangeable novelists, each describing the same predicament, one from a Jewish vantage point, the other Catholic. I must have read *The End of the Affair* and *The Magician of Lublin* at about the same time. Both describe "the problem" exquisitely well, the agonies of lost faith, love and even hope. Both were equally unable to resolve the crises except by making a kind of shaky nod to their respective traditions.

In *The Magician of Lublin*, Yasha the magician, traversing the well-trodden ground of the desired *shiksa*, the mendacity of business whether gangster or upright and the fall from faith, finally resolves it all by bricking himself up and becoming Yasha the penitent.

Thus it was that I was stunned to read Vivian Gornick's review of Florence Noiville's biography of Isaac Bashevis Singer ["Before the Law," March 5] and find a recap of those long-ago thoughts. I have no idea whether the comparison has been made elsewhere. I'd like to think it's just Ms. Gornick and me. HAROLD TICKTIN

Savannah

■ I have read a lot of Isaac Bashevis Singer's stories and always end up with a feeling of utter despair. What I have always kept from Singer is a comment he made at the start of his story "Shosha": His people had lived in Poland for almost a thousand years yet spoke hardly any Polish. Their lives were regulated by two dead languages, Hebrew and Aramaic, and all thought was devoted to knowing the rituals appropriate for a temple that had ceased to exist 1,900 years earlier. This is the culture Arnold Toynbee called a fossil, for which he was attacked as an anti-Semite. But any attempt to make this fossilized culture meaningful is doomed to failure. Singer knew this. NORMAN RAVITCH

New York City

■ Vivian Gornick writes that Isaac Bashevis Singer "never allowed his work in book form to be published in Yiddish. Everyone in the world read him either in or from the English translation." She is mistaken. While it is true that some of his Yiddish works have never been published in book form, the YIVO library has ten books of his in Yiddish—five novels and five collections of short stories.

Der sotn in goray was published in Warsaw in 1935. The last original edition in his lifetime, according to our catalogue, was *Der bal-tshuve* (The Penitent) in 1974. PAUL GLASSER
YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

GORNICK REPLIES

New York City

■ Paul Glasser is, of course, right. There are many Singer stories and novels in Yiddish. What I meant to say, but said badly, is that it was after Singer was "discovered" by his American translators in the mid-1950s that he stopped all publication of his work in Yiddish in book form. Except for the stories that appeared in the Yiddish newspaper the *Forward*, from then on all of Singer's work appeared in English. VIVIAN GORNICK

ANTI-IMMIGRANT AD AROUSES IRE

Los Angeles

■ I received your May 14 issue just after watching the LAPD attack immigrants' rights demonstrators. When I saw the advertisement on the back cover I was taken aback. Then when I heard one of your writers, Max Blumenthal, on *Democracy Now!* exposing the close ties between the anti-immigrant movement and white supremacists, I was outraged. A short Google search of the Coalition for the Future American Worker (CFAW) showed it as a creation of the Federation for American Immigration Reform and the American Immigration Control, which has ties to the white supremacist Pioneer Fund. The ad made its pitch using an African-American "civil rights leader," who by the way was Jeb Bush's frontman for the attempt to privatize Florida's schools through the use of vouchers. CFAW is not simply an organization concerned about H-1B visas, and you should know that, so why run that advertisement—which shows tacit approval of CFAW? What's next: ads from Ward Connerly's anti–affirmative action group, the American Civil Rights Institute?
ELAN DELGADILLO

The Nation*'s position on immigration is not that of CFAW. Over the past 140 years of publishing we have printed more than 2,700 pieces discussing immigration issues from a progressive perspective, including, most recently, a February 26 cover story, March 5 and May 7 editorials and an editorial on page 8 of this issue. The May 14 ad is not an endorsement of CFAW; we hope readers understand that an ad on immigration (or any topic) does not imply the magazine's endorsement of the ad's content.*

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Publisher emeritus Victor Navasky recently wrote: "I, for one, approach all advertisers (in The Nation *or anywhere else) with suspicion, and we pay our readers the compliment of thinking they do, too. This is especially true of…GM, GE, [Fox News] and the many other corporate advertisers* The Nation *has carried over the years and whose messages we regularly attack in our editorial columns. If we allowed the advertisers to influence editorial content, that would be prostitution, but we don't."*

We regret that some ads offend our readers. Ads pay our bills. They do not reflect our editorial position. —The Editors

PALESTINIAN POETS

Yellow Springs, Ohio

■ Poetry editor John Palattella has the soul of one who truly understands anguish. His review of three Palestinian poets' work, "Lines of Resistance" [Feb. 19], so spoke to me that I kept rereading paragraphs to make certain of the poets' lines. I also underlined such phrases of Palattella's prose poetry as "escape from the prison of nationalism"; "open-air cell of sadness, melancholy and absurdity"; a style that "flowers furiously into a bittersweet and melancholy song"; "the incantatory music quickens"; "a sadness deeper than sadness." As one who was raised a Protestant Zionist Evangelical, I grew out of it from reading and hearing such Jewish critics as Balfour Brickner, I.F. Stone, Israel Shahak and Michael Lerner. You are to be commended for steadfastly continuing the critique of US-Israeli policies.
GORDON A. CHAPMAN

Houston

■ John Palattella reviews Mahmoud Darwish's poetry in English translation and tries to define Darwish's standing in the world of Palestinian poetry. This leaves the reader with a restricted view of Darwish's body of work. Palattella painted Darwish with the brush of the "heroic" and "defiant" poet of "resistance." The history of the evolution of Darwish's poetry is too versatile and encompassing for such a limited description. The poems that defined Darwish's stature in modern world poetry have been of the epic, personal, love, theatrical, conversational, witness, diary poem forms, to name some. Darwish's eminence as a modern poet crossed the borders of Palestine long ago. The universality of his poems, especially in the 1980s and beyond, cannot be reduced to a description of what his early poems were. HANA EL SAHLY

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EDITORIALS

Morality Gets a Massage

So far, the most significant player to show up on Washington madam Deborah Jeane Palfrey's much-discussed client list is USAID chief Randall Tobias, the former pharmaceutical company CEO who ran Bush's global AIDS initiative for its first three years. His ignominious tenure as AIDS ambassador was marked by a preference for pricey brand-name HIV drugs over cheap generics, which sharply reduced the number of people who could be treated. Ironically, given his regular "massages" from call girls, when we can surmise he ignored the abstinence-only instruction to "keep all of your clothes all the way on all of the time," Tobias was also an avid defender of the President's puritanical approach to HIV prevention.

Tobias was the hatchet man who forced every US grant recipient to publicly condemn prostitution—even struggling outfits doing the sensitive work of persuading destitute sex workers to use condoms. A forthcoming study from the Center for Health and Gender Equity of five Asian countries where commercial sex is driving the AIDS epidemic found that the policy has resulted in the closure of drop-in centers for street prostitutes and a scaling back of other successful prevention efforts.

It was Tom DeLay's ethically challenged Congress that slapped the global AIDS initiative with a one-third abstinence earmark on prevention. Tobias promoted this approach so zealously that in some countries, like Nigeria, nearly 70 percent of all US dollars granted to prevent the sexual transmission of HIV were channeled toward abstinence.

Tobias is not the first abstinence czar to leave his job after running afoul of the moral agenda he promoted. Claude Allen, once the leading White House abstinence advocate, stepped down as domestic policy adviser last year after he was caught stealing. Ted Haggard, once head of the National Association of Evangelicals—powerful boosters of abstinence-only spending—resigned last fall after a gay hustler named him as a client. But Tobias's fall comes as momentum is finally building against the $2.5 billion-and-counting abstinence boondoggle.

Though the Institute of Medicine called for the elimination of abstinence-only programs in 2000, Bush set about doubling their budget instead. Last month the Administration's own study—mandated by Congress a decade ago but delayed while ideological spinmeisters handicapped the criteria to help produce favorable results—was finally released. Posted quietly on the web without even a press release, it affirmed what every academic study had found before: Preaching abstinence doesn't produce it. Numerous studies show that contraceptive access cuts teen pregnancy rates and condom education dramatically reduces HIV transmission.

As with opposition to the war, the American people are ahead of Congress on this issue. A recent study found that 82 percent of Americans want comprehensive sex education for their kids. Nine states have now turned down the tempting pot of abstinence money, including "red state" Montana. Abstinence funding should go the way of Randall Tobias. Legislation like the Pathway Act, which would revoke the abstinence earmark on global AIDS spending, and the Real Act, which would allocate funds for comprehensive sex ed, both introduced by Barbara Lee, need muscle from Democratic leaders. When the President's AIDS initiative comes up for reauthorization in two years, Congress should strike the prostitution pledge and the ban on needle exchange.

The moral contradictions of the abstinence-mongers speak eloquently to the folly of basing public health decisions on religious injunctions and fantasies of social control. It's time for Congress to stop this dangerous crusade, both here and abroad.

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COMMENT

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Invisible America

May 17 is the fifty-third anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the iconic case we celebrate for having ended the notion that racially separate education could be considered "equal." Yet the meaning of that case has always been the subject of dispute. I grew up in a household where we learned that segregation was bad because it was premised on the stigma of inferiority. Segregation licensed the isolation of African-Americans from the benefits of citizenship; it limited access to a full range of public spaces, not just schools. I took it for granted that such provincialism ultimately hobbled both whites and blacks as well as the anxious "in between" groups, such as recent immigrants and Asian-Americans. We cannot be full participants in a democracy if we have built impermeable walls around our various identity groups.

From the beginning, of course, there was an alternative narrative, voiced mostly by apologists for Jim Crow: that freedom of association should allow us to live in ghettos if we choose. The most interesting exposition of this view—interesting because it's from a refugee from Hitler's Germany—is probably Hannah Arendt's controversial 1959 essay "Reflections on Little Rock." "It has been said," she asserts, "that enforced integration is no better than enforced segregation, and this is perfectly true."

In reviewing her essay recently, I was struck by how much that language is echoed in attacks on recent efforts to integrate schools. Today, with as many if not more schools segregated along a black-white divide than in the late 1960s, we await the Supreme Court's ruling in a pair of cases that will decide the future of the integration movement, after a decade of rulings constricting the remedies made available by *Brown*. In *Community Schools v. Seattle School District #1* and *Meredith v. Jefferson County Board of Education*, the Court will rule on whether the voluntary efforts of local school boards to consider racial balance as one of many factors in configuring student bodies is constitutionally permissible.

This past December, when the cases were presented to the Court, some of the Justices made troubling analogies. In questioning attorneys for the Seattle and Louisville school districts, Justice Scalia argued, "It seems to me you're saying you can't make an omelet without breaking eggs…. I mean, if we have a lot of crime out there, and the only way to get rid of it is to use warrantless searches, you know, fudge on some of the protections of the Bill of Rights…." It was disturbing—his notion that voluntary school integration is comparable to a warrantless search, an actual violation of the Bill of Rights. On Amy Goodman's *Democracy Now!* radio show, the Heritage Foundation's Todd Gaziano claimed that the plans "set these very hard quota bans," powerful buzzwords that invoke histories of discrimination against Jews and Asians. But the policies at stake in these cases could better be described as "soft voluntary integrationism." As Ted Shaw, president of the NAACP's Legal Defense and Educational Fund, has expressed it: "What is being challenged is the right of parents, communities and local school districts to determine whether that seat must be segregated or can represent our country's vibrant diversity."

One of the reasons I find Arendt's essay such intriguing read-

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ing at this time is that she self-consciously positions herself as an outsider in offering her opinions. She admits that she has never lived in the South; she admits what she does not know. Yet it is precisely what she did not know that undermines her conclusions; and as I listen to those in today's debate who argue that efforts to integrate are exactly the same as segregation, I am similarly struck by what is not being considered.

Let me quote Arendt at some length, from the section of her essay "A Reply to Critics": "The most startling part of the whole business was the Federal decision to start integration in, of all places, the public schools…. I think no one will find it easy to forget the photograph reproduced in newspapers and magazines throughout the country, showing a Negro girl, accompanied by a white friend of her father, walking away from school, persecuted and followed into bodily proximity by a jeering and grimacing mob of youngsters. The girl, obviously, was asked to be a hero—that is, something neither her absent father nor the equally absent representatives of the NAACP felt called upon to be."

What's missing from Arendt's view is any sense of background. *Brown* was by no means the first attempt to integrate schools; it was at least the eleventh attempt in the twentieth century. It was hardly the first attempt to integrate public facilities, such as buses, trains, parks and bathrooms—*Plessy v. Ferguson* being the most obvious example of a prior failed attempt. The very active role of the NAACP was invisible to her, as was the degree to which its involvement was necessarily underplayed or even disguised. And Arendt lacked the essential social understanding of why a white friend rather than a black father would have been necessary to accompany a black child trying to integrate a school in the Deep South of that era—the risk of death being at the top of the list. "If I were a Negro mother in the South," she appeals, "I would feel that the Supreme Court ruling, unwillingly but unavoidably, has put my child into a more humiliating position than it had been in before." If this last statement seems particularly uninformed, it is well to remember that she was writing at a moment when much of white America was also either uninformed or in serious denial about the violence that circumscribed the lives of blacks in the Jim Crow South. It took the Emmett Till case to begin some national introspection about how viciously the boundaries of social comportment were patrolled in those days.

When I look back on all this, while at the same time looking forward to the next phase of our attempt to build a more perfect union, I wonder at the complex blinders that could misinform such a powerful and sympathetic intellect as Arendt's. Arendt was not only an "outsider"; she also purchased the heroic script that most Americans tell themselves, ourselves. I wonder, too, what is invisible in today's world that allows so many in our polity, few of whom are declared segregationists, to think that an all-white classroom is exactly the same as an all-black classroom is exactly the same as an all-Asian or all-Hispanic classroom; and that the attempt to cross-pollinate them amounts to nothing less than a new segregation. What narratives are we inventing to justify the gross racial divisions, the callous disproportions, the cruel imbalances, not merely at all levels of education but in our neighborhoods, our prisons, our healthcare, our jobs, our spheres of esteem, our circles of love—in the equality of citizenship that begins with the image of that eager, lonely child on her first day of school, for whom all things might be possible, if we only willed it so?

PATRICIA J. WILLIAMS

Patricia J. Williams, a professor of law at Columbia University, writes the column "Diary of a Mad Law Professor" for this magazine. Her most recent book is Open House *(Farrar, Straus & Giroux).*

Laboring for Edwards

Seattle

When the AFL-CIO asked each of the Democratic presidential candidates to participate in a separate labor town hall meeting, John Edwards quickly chose Seattle as his preferred venue. He was determined not to repeat his mistake of 2004, when he did almost no campaigning in the Northwest. The price he paid was high: finishing fourth in the crucial Washington caucus behind minor candidate Dennis Kucinich.

So here was Edwards on May 1, very early in the 2008 cycle, appearing before a wildly enthusiastic crowd of 800 unionists in a Seattle machinists hall. He desperately wanted labor's endorsement and its vote. "In the midterms, we delivered twenty-six legislative seats," says Dave Freiboth, head of Seattle's King County Labor Council, "more than anywhere else in the country. Candidates are paying attention."

And it's a two-way street. This year, more than ever, organized labor is striving to push its agenda hard and early in the presidential race. In March the nation's largest healthcare union and richest PAC, the Service Employees International Union, summoned the contenders to Las Vegas for a debate on healthcare (and the union has given them an August 1 deadline to submit specific plans). The AFL-CIO is sponsoring its own series of one-on-one town halls with the candidates, culminating in August, when the Democratic rivals will appear together before a federation gathering in Chicago. "Working families will have the chance to ask candidates what they will do to make America work for working families," said AFL-CIO president John Sweeney.

Sometime after Labor Day the unions in both major federations, the AFL-CIO and the SEIU-dominated Change to Win Coalition, are expected to make their official endorsement, opening the floodgates for tens of millions in contributions and thousands of campaigning union foot soldiers.

Edwards, currently running third in most polls, has spent the past two years quietly but meticulously laying the groundwork for becoming labor's candidate, hoping to ride that rail straight to the nomination. He's been walking picket lines, supporting organizing drives and speaking out on union issues. He's taken his 2004 stump speech decrying the "two Americas" and tried to give it practical expression in support of the poorer side of the equation.

No surprise, then, that Edwards repeatedly and emphatically reminded the Seattle town hall of just how deep that commitment has become, insisting that unlike traditional Democrats, who merely seek union support, he has adopted a view that American prosperity can expand only if unionization expands. "It

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COMMENT

doesn't matter who I'm speaking to," Edwards told the crowd. "I talk about this issue wherever I go, whoever the audience is. I've talked about these organizing issues in front of Chambers of Commerce…and I think we desperately need comprehensive labor law reform." That line provoked the fourth standing ovation of his pitch.

The fifth ovation came when the former North Carolina senator said, "The difference between being unionized and not is the difference between living in poverty and not…. I think if somebody can join the Republican Party by signing their name to a card, any worker in America ought to be able to join a union by doing the same thing."

Three more ovations erupted during Edwards's forty-five-minute appearance, as the candidate proposed measures that would require employers to provide or pay for healthcare and ban permanent strike replacements, and called for approving only those trade pacts with real labor protection. Edwards punctuated his appeal on a personal note, pointing out that his father and brother have healthcare today only because of a union plan.

If the vote had been taken that moment, he would have swept the floor. "The thing about Edwards that resonates so much with me is just how pro-union he is, coming from such a red state," says Freiboth, who chaired the event. "When he comes out and delivers on our issues from such a conservative part of the country, it's something very, very powerful."

Edwards has also made significant inroads among the national labor leadership. His detailed and specific plan for universal healthcare has been warmly received by the SEIU; in the coming election that union pledges to spend more than the $65 million it poured into the 2004 cycle. And Edwards has been lavishly praised for his behind-the-scenes work in supporting a number of recent organizing efforts. "I'm 61, and in my lifetime I don't recall any candidate for President who articulated a belief not just that unions are good but that they are necessary for what ails society," said John Wilhelm, a leader of the textile and hotel workers' union, UNITE HERE, recently.

Support from UNITE HERE is considered of utmost importance in next year's early Nevada primary—a contest that could provide strategic momentum going into the mega-primary February 5, when it's possible the nomination will be settled. The union exercises enormous clout, with more than 60,000 members of its Local 226 working in the Las Vegas area. More than a year ago Edwards was already traveling cross-country giving his personal and often late-night support to hotel workers embroiled in a contentious contract fight.

Union support and funding in the presidential arena, however, has frequently failed to deliver the general election or even the party nomination. In the 2004 race both the SEIU and AFSCME (the public employees' union) threw their early support to the ill-fated insurgent campaign of Howard Dean. AFSCME later withdrew its endorsement. This year AFSCME could again be a wild card in the endorsement process. In 2005 the SEIU left the AFL-CIO and along with UNITE HERE, the Teamsters and a handful of other unions formed the rival Change to Win Coalition. Edwards, at least at this date, figures to be the odds-on favorite to snatch CTWC's endorsement. Inside the AFL-CIO, however, AFSCME has been left as the single most powerful union. Its president, Gerald McEntee, has been a loyal ally of the Clintons, and he might balk at challenging Hillary's primary run.

In the meantime, John Edwards continues his quest to capture labor's support. An hour after the Seattle meeting ended, he was standing before another enthusiastic audience of hundreds, this time at a community college thirty miles up the road. True to his vow, he was telling that crowd the same thing he had told the labor audience: that without a larger union movement we'll never have a larger middle class. MARC COOPER

Marc Cooper, a Nation *contributing editor, is a visiting professor and associate director at the USC Annenberg School Institute for Justice and Journalism.*

CALVIN TRILLIN

On Three Out of The Ten Republican Presidential Candidates Stating That They Don't Believe in Evolution

They think that Darwin's got it wrong:
God made us all. Pow! Just like that.
It could be worse. We still don't know
How many think the Earth is flat.

France à Droite

The Thatcher-Blair move to the right has finally hit France. In a campaign that played on fears of crime and immigration and vowed to trim social spending, Nicolas Sarkozy, with 53 percent of the vote, handily won the runoff presidential election against Socialist candidate Ségolène Royal. Sarko took two-thirds of neo-Fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen's votes from the first round and, crucially, more of center-right candidate François Bayrou's than did Ségo. Sarko has already been making deals with the latter's MPs, assuring himself a victory in next month's important parliamentary elections. Clearly, enough voters bought his conservative vision of a people who would look out for themselves rather than depend on a protectionist state. As in much of Europe, a part of the left's vision has been left behind. Sarko could afford to sound presidential in his victory speech, assuring the French that he would defend all their interests and that no citizen would be left behind. But the country he will rule is far from unified.

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COMMENT

As in Caesar's time, all Gaul is divided into three parts. A third of the voters have been firmly for the Socialists, wanting to maintain France's comprehensive welfare state and overall high standard of living. Another third is persuaded that Sarko is right in wanting to introduce neoliberal economic reforms. On the eve of the May 2 presidential debate, 19 percent were still undecided. These centrists agreed with Ségo on preserving the social safety net but were with Sarko on crime and immigration.

Ségo took a big gamble in their face-to-face confrontation, wanting to show that a woman could be tough and "presidential," clearly hoping to provoke Sarko's notoriously bad temper. She attacked him partly from the right, pointing to the recent rape of two policewomen, saying they should all be escorted home after work, a suggestion that Sarko (and presumably many others) scoffed at as being impracticable. Rather than seeming firm, to many she came across as a scolding schoolmarm, literally, telling Sarko to "do your homework," though her own figures proved to be more inaccurate than his. The results the next day were devastating: The 66 percent of those who'd found her *sympa* (likable) before the debate fell to 53 percent, while the unlikable Sarkozy went up four points.

Neither candidate proved fully persuasive. Ségo defended the thirty-five-hour week, the great Socialist achievement, claiming it had added a million new shared jobs (most economists say a more accurate count is a third of that). Sarko didn't dare attack the thirty-five-hour week directly, but he wants to encourage more overtime by cutting taxes on overtime pay. French employers have been reluctant to use their existing allocations of overtime, though, since they can find cheaper labor elsewhere. Auto workers in Slovakia, for example, make a quarter of French wages; now more cars are produced there per capita than anywhere else in Europe.

Studs Terkel, Listener

Studs Terkel's accomplishments as America's pre-eminent listener are all the more remarkable when you consider that he happens to be a prodigious talker. He is, in other words, a monument to restraint. A couple of times, I've reversed roles with Studs—I've interviewed him for an hour on stage—and each time I was tempted to ask him one question, take off my lapel-microphone and join the audience. He could easily have held the audience for a one-hour answer that ranged from his thoughts on jazz to his soap-opera career playing gangsters to the dinner-table conversations at the men's hotel his mother ran to his antic experiences with the blacklist to the happy times in his favorite Chicago saloon, Ricardo's, where one of the waiters was cued to stroll over to the table and join him in the Spanish Civil War song "Los Cuatro Generales." Once Studs got on his roll, in fact, he might not have even noticed that I was missing.

One of those stage interviews was in San Francisco and one in New York, but wherever Studs is he brings Chicago with him. In the early days of cable television—when there were no cable listings in the newspapers and the most talked-about show on local cable in New York consisted of a man who walked around town asking women to show him their breasts and Chicago was not yet even wired for cable—Studs and I did a talk show called *Nightcap* for a channel that I think was a precursor of Arts & Entertainment. We sometimes referred to *Nightcap* as the only fully clothed show on cable TV. In each program we chatted with a panel of people who were distinguished in a particular art form—three divas, say, or three architects or three writers of science fiction—and what continued to amaze me was that Studs seemed to know nearly all of them. I concluded that illustrious visitors to Chicago were taken to see Studs in the way that illustrious visitors to Chicago were once given a tour of the stockyards. Once somebody on the show mentioned Jane Austen, and I said, "If she ever went through Chicago, Studs knows her."

In the years Studs did his interview show on the radio, authors, even some who were not particularly illustrious, were taken to see him when they got to Chicago on a book tour. If an author arrived toward the end of his tour, he was likely to have repeated phrases from his book so often that they were beginning to have a depressing similarity to the flight attendant's announcement about seat backs and tray tables. Then Studs would open up a copy of the book, which had been heavily underlined with a broad black pen, and read a few passages in that gravelly voice that somehow made the words sound fresh again. The author would find himself thinking, Hey, that writing's not half bad! I once suggested that foundations that wanted to buck up American writers didn't have to send them to villas in Italy. They could simply have the writers interviewed by Studs. You wouldn't even have to air the results.

When I was the visiting author, Studs and I usually got into a taxi after the taping to go to lunch, and the driver almost invariably realized that he had one of Chicago's iconic figures in the back seat. There usually followed a conversation in which Studs, through his questions, displayed a remarkable familiarity with the driver's old neighborhood, whether the neighborhood was Back of the Yards or Nigeria. The almost instantaneous connection Studs made with the driver was always a reminder to me that this man, who had interviewed Leonard Bernstein and Bertrand Russell and Ralph Ellison and Zero Mostel and Margaret Mead, created his most enduring work by gathering the thoughts of ordinary people on their struggles and their daily labor and even their deaths. They shared those thoughts with him, I think, partly because they sensed that his curiosity and his generosity of spirit embraced everyone, without regard to rank or station. They recognized him as a monument to much more than simply restraint.

CALVIN TRILLIN

Nation *Deadline Poet Calvin Trillin's tribute appears as the preface to* The Studs Terkel Reader, *just published by The New Press.*

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COMMENT

Sarko argued for tax cuts and debt reduction, the old Reagan refrain. Such cuts would affect all social programs and undermine French standards of economic equality, which are extraordinary, at least compared with Britain and the United States, the two rich countries where the well-being of children is the worst, according to UNICEF. Sarko, who has been caricatured in the French media in a Margaret Thatcher wig, proposes tax cuts that would go much further than hers, and certainly much further than outgoing President Jacques Chirac's recent cuts, which were steeply regressive.

Other than a few protectionist asides by Sarko, neither candidate had much to say about the very real threats France faces from globalization. Nor did either have any persuasive ideas about the massive, now multigenerational, unemployment among France's immigrants. Ségo's famous suggestion of military training for delinquents, an incredibly expensive idea, seemed more attuned to persuading hesitant centrist voters than to solving the problem. At least she offered helpful suggestions on education, stressing the need for smaller classes in poorer school districts and more spending on education in general.

Although Sarko kept his cool in the May 2 debate, he continued to go off on bizarre rightist tangents just days before the election. Having earlier argued that pedophilia was genetic, he showed his contempt for the left by making impassioned speeches about the evils of 1968, which he argued had "abolished the difference between good and evil, between the real and the fake, between the beautiful and the ugly.... This election will decide whether its heritage continues or is banished forever."

In the last days before the vote Sarko, a veritable Jekyll and Hyde, tried to look presidential. Well ahead in the polls, he talked about uniting all French people. Occasionally the mask slipped, as when he raised the specter of 450 million poor Africans flooding into France; he was still instinctively playing to the old Le Penist fears that worked so well for him in the first round of the election. Sarko's backers feel he has now successfully integrated the far right into his camp, just as Socialist François Mitterrand undermined the Communists years ago.

Ségo's last speeches argued that Sarko's election might lead to more urban riots, and in fact, some rioting did occur. Many immigrants understandably fear and loathe Sarko, both for his rhetoric and because when he was Interior Minister he changed the old Socialist policy of neighborhood policing to one of aggressive, Giuliani-like stops and searches. The *New York Times* Paris correspondent did not seem to feel that this was a bad thing, but many French saw it as racist and counterproductive. They fear an even more divided country and speak of the military intervening if there are ghetto riots like those that erupted in 2005. The most pessimistic predict a new Battle of Algiers in the Paris suburbs.

A few minutes after her defeat, Ségo made a speech placing herself at the heart of future Socialist Party changes, something contested by many of the old leadership, who feel that she systematically sidestepped them during the campaign. Those who agree with her feel that the left, which has now lost three presidential elections in a row, simply cannot be elected without merging with the center, as it has done in Italy. Despite her missteps, Ségo did no worse than Lionel Jospin in 1995. Others will argue for a more unified left, one that has a far clearer message than Ségo's. But thus far, it's not clear what that would be.

On a beautiful sunny May Day, still a holiday in much of Europe, we watched the annual parade of at least 30,000 workers coming from the Place de la République, most wearing STOP SARKO stickers. Many carried banners protesting plant closings and downsizing. It was hard not to be touched by the hope that their way of life might still be saved from the great threat it faces. Under Sarkozy, we can be sure that they will lose much of their *égalité* and *fraternité*. Let us hope that their *liberté* is not diminished as well.

ANDRÉ SCHIFFRIN

André Schiffrin's book on postwar France and America, A Political Education, *has just been published by Melville House.*

MacARTHUR PARK

The presence of so many children at the immigrants' rights rally in Los Angeles's MacArthur Park on May 1 was no accident: festive flower-making activities had been planned not just to entertain the thousands of families who turned out for the protest but to draw attention to the range of lives affected by the nation's badly flawed immigration policies. A debate that considers immigrants only as workers, the organizers reasoned, obscures the way raids and deportations reverberate through whole communities. The scene that unfolded that day in the park, however, could not have been further from their expectations, as 600 highly trained LAPD officers fired some 150 rubber bullets into the throngs of people, which included not only children but many news reporters. An order in English to disperse had been inaudible and unintelligible anyway to the largely Spanish-speaking crowd. The images, broadcast on television and YouTube, showed exactly how the criminalization of immigrants can play out in real time.

Despite the hurdles it faces, the immigrants' rights movement is going strong. Turnout at this year's May Day was lower than last year but nonetheless significant: 80,000 in Milwaukee, 150,000 in Chicago, 35,000 in LA, according to media reports. Just as outrage at the notorious Sensenbrenner bill galvanized the massive 2006 protest, many of this year's marchers were angry at the way the Bush Administration's raids and deportations have been tearing apart families and communities. In December's Swift raids alone, more than 1,200 immigrants, 95 percent of whom were accused of no crime, were arrested. Since then the raids have continued across the country, sweeping undocumented workers into jails, leaving families in the dark and children stranded. The raids have helped the Administration appease the nativist far right so it can push forward its corporate-friendly immigration reform agenda. In Washington, immigrant advocates are pressing Democrats to resist the Administration's proposals and insisting on key policy reforms. In the streets, immigrants are clamoring for justice—and they will not soon forget MacArthur Park.

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ALEXANDER COCKBURN

Who Are the Merchants of Fear?

No response is more predictable than the reflexive squawk of the greenhouse fearmongers that anyone questioning their claims is in the pay of the energy companies. A second, equally predictable retort contrasts the ever-diminishing number of agnostics with the growing legions of scientists now born again to the "truth" that anthropogenic CO_2 is responsible for the earth's warming trend.

Actually, the energy companies have long since adapted to prevailing fantasies, dutifully reciting the whole catechism about carbon neutrality, repositioning themselves as eager pioneers in the search for alternative fuels, settling comfortably into new homes, such as British Petroleum's Energy Biosciences Institute at UC, Berkeley.

In fact, when it comes to corporate sponsorship of crackpot theories about why the world is getting warmer, the best documented conspiracy of interest is between the fearmongers and the nuclear industry, now largely owned by oil companies, whose prospects twenty years ago looked dark. The apex fearmongers are well aware that the only exit from the imaginary crisis they have been sponsoring is through a big door marked "nuclear power," with a servants' side door labeled "clean coal."

The world's best-known hysteric and self-promoter on the topic of man's physical and moral responsibility for global warming is Al Gore, a shill for the nuclear and coal barons from the first day he stepped into Congress entrusted with the sacred duty to protect the budgetary and regulatory interests of the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Oak Ridge National Lab. White House advisory bodies on climate change in the Clinton/Gore years were well freighted with nukers like Larry Papay of Bechtel.

As a denizen of Washington since his diaper years, Gore has always understood that threat inflation is the surest tool to plump budgets and rouse voters. By the mid-'90s he'd positioned himself at the head of a strategic alliance formed around "the challenge of climate change," which stepped forward to take Communism's place in the threatosphere essential to political life.

The foot soldiers in this alliance have been the grant-guzzling climate modelers and their Internationale, the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, whose collective scientific expertise is reverently invoked by devotees of the fearmongers' catechism. The IPCC has the usual army of functionaries and grant farmers and the merest sprinkling of actual scientists with the prime qualification of being climatologists or atmospheric physicists.

To identify either government-funded climate modelers or their political shock troops at the IPCC with scientific objectivity is as unrealistic as detecting the same in a craniologist financed by Lombroso studying a murderer's head in a nineteenth-century prison. The craniologist's calipers were adjusted by the usual incentives of stipends and professional ego to find in the skull of that murderer ridges, bumps and depressions, each meticulously equated with an ungovernable passion or a mental derangement.

At least Lombroso and his retinue measured heads. All Al Gore has ever needed is a hot day or some heavy rain as opportunity to promote the unassailable theory of man-made global warming. Come a rainy summer (1995) or a routine El Niño (1997) and Gore is there for the photo op, his uplifted finger warning of worse to come.

Man-made-global-warming theory is fed by pseudo-quantitative predictions from climate careerists working primarily off the megacomputer General Circulation Models, whose home ports include the National Center for Atmospheric Research, NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies and the Department of Commerce's Geophysical Fluid Dynamics Lab.

These are multibillion-dollar computer modeling bureaucracies as intent on self-preservation and budgetary enhancement as cognate nuclear bureaucracies at Oak Ridge and Los Alamos. They are as unlikely to develop models refuting the hypothesis of human-induced global warming as is the IPCC to say the weather is getting a little bit warmer but there's no great cause for alarm. Threat inflation is their business. Think of the culture that engendered the nonexistent missile gap of the late 1950s and you'll get some sense of the political, economic and bureaucratic forces at work today stoking panic at the specter of man-made global warming and the nuclear plants needed to fight it.

By the late 1980s the UN high brass clearly perceived the "challenge" of climate change to be the horse to ride to build up the organization's increasingly threadbare moral authority and to claim a role beyond that of being an obvious American errand boy. In 1988 it gave us the IPCC.

The cycle of alarmist predictions is now well established. Not long before some new UN moot, a prominent fearmonger like James Hansen or Michael Mann will make a tremulous statement about the accelerating tempo of the warming crisis. The cry is taken up by the IPCC and headlined by the *New York Times*, with exactly the same lack of critical evaluation as that newspaper's recycling of the government's lies about Saddam's WMDs.

When measured reality doesn't cooperate with the lurid model predictions, new compensating factors are "discovered," such as the sulfate aerosols popular in the 1990s, recruited to cool off the obviously excessive heat predicted by the models. Or inconvenient data are waterboarded into submission, as happened with ice-core samples that failed to confirm the modelers' need for record temperatures today. As Richard Kerr, *Science*'s man on global warming, remarked, "Climate modelers have been 'cheating' for so long it's almost become respectable."

The consequence? As with the arms-spending spiral powered by the cold war fearmongers, vast sums of money will be uselessly spent on programs that won't work against an enemy that doesn't exist. Meanwhile, real and curbable environmental perils are scanted. Hysteria rules the day, drowning useful initiatives such as environmental cleanup, while smoothing the way for the nuclear industry to reap its global rewards.

Next: Are things really that bad? ■

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KATHA POLLITT

'Democracy' Is Hell

The video, originally posted on jebar.info, a Kurdish website, is now plastered all over the Internet: a young girl in a red track-suit jacket and black underpants, beaten, kicked and stoned to death by a mob of excited, shouting men. It's a gruesome marriage of twenty-first-century technology and medieval barbarity. At one point, bloody and dazed, the girl tries to protect herself, whereupon a man drops a big rock or lump of concrete on her face, killing her. Her crime? As an Agence France-Presse story explains, Doaa Khalil Aswad, a 17-year-old member of the Kurdish Yazidi religious minority, a non-Muslim sect, had fallen in love with a Sunni boy and possibly converted to Islam. For this "crime" against family and community, Doaa was murdered in the small village of Beshika, near Mosul, in a collective act of woman hatred, led by her brothers and uncles. In the video you can see local policemen watching and one man recording the killing on his cellphone.

This is the new Iraq, where women were going to be free and equal—no more "rape rooms," no more psychopathic Uday Hussein summoning young virgins to the palace for his pleasure. In the early days of the occupation, we heard a lot about building schools, starting women's health programs, funding women's microenterprises. At the 2005 State of the Union address, Laura Bush sat with proudly purple-fingered Safia Taleb al-Suhail telegraphing the message that women's rights and democracy went together and that both were part of the big plan for Iraq. Well, scratch that.

Women's status was never as high under Saddam as opponents of the war sometimes asserted, and it was already declining throughout the 1990s, as Saddam embraced Islam to distract the populace from the effects of the Gulf War, UN sanctions and his own depredations. But Iraq today is even worse for women: more repressive, more violent, more lawless. As if car bombs and suicide bombers weren't horrific enough, criminal gangs, religious militias and death squads kidnap, rape and kill with impunity, with special attention to women professionals, students and rights activists. According to the United Nations' most recent quarterly report on human rights in Iraq, domestic violence and "honor" killings are on the rise—Kurdistan, often described as comparatively peaceful and orderly, saw more than forty such killings between January and March of this year; in the province of Erbil, rapes quadrupled between 2003 and 2006. Women who'd worn Western clothes and moved about freely all their lives have been terrorized into wearing the abaya and staying inside unless accompanied by male relatives. In Sadr City and elsewhere, Shariah courts mete out misogynist "justice."

"The political climate in Iraq is such that anyone can carry out crimes against women," Kurdish feminist and labor activist Houzan Mahmoud told me when I reached her by phone in London, where she serves as the UK representative of the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI). "You can come upon women's bodies anywhere." Far from promoting women's rights and security, "the occupation has strengthened the tribes, political Islam and reactionary bourgeois parties—all of which are anti-woman." The true extent of the violence may never be known. According to Yifat Susskind, author of Madre's 2007 report *Promising Democracy, Imposing Theocracy: Gender-Based Violence and the US War on Iraq*, comprehensive statistics don't exist: The Iraqi institutions responsible for collecting human rights data are complicit in human rights abuses, and besides, the United States has told the Ministry of Health not to publish figures on civilian fatalities.

"I haven't seen the United States offering any protection for women," Mahmoud told me. Indeed, the United States is part of the problem. Think of Abeer Qassim al-Janabi, the 14-year-old girl raped and then murdered with her family by US soldiers in Mahmoudiya in March of last year. Think of the women imprisoned at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere, sometimes only for being the wife or sister of a man US forces were looking for. Think of women terrorized by soldiers who break into their homes and hold them at gunpoint. Given the punishments meted out to "unchaste" women, victims are unlikely to report rapes committed by US or allied soldiers or Iraqi military or police forces—but if the case of Abeer was unique, this would be the first military occupation in the history of the world in which the invaders and their local sidekicks didn't help themselves to girls and women.

Four years after the fall of Saddam, the country is a political and economic basket case. The US-engineered Constitution undermines secularism in favor of religious authority, while billions in US aid disappear into the pockets of contractors and bribe takers. One third of the population is poor; last year there were 300,000 widows in Baghdad alone; according to a new report from Save the Children, Iraq now boasts the world's biggest fifteen-year increase in infant and child mortality. In 2005, 122,000 children under 5 died—that's one in eight.

I asked Mahmoud if the American presence had achieved anything at all for women. "No," she said. "I can't honestly say it has." Like other women's groups there, OWFI now carries out its work in secret.

* * *

The Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq runs shelters for battered women in four Iraqi cities and an "underground railroad" to conduct women at risk of murder to safe havens. In response to the murder of Doaa it is mounting an international campaign to ban honor killings and force Kurdish and Iraqi legal authorities to investigate and prosecute them. There have been demonstrations in London and Erbil; you can sign OWFI's petition at www.equalityiniraq.com. You can also show your support for a democratic, secular Iraq in which women's rights and lives are respected by clicking on "make a donation" or by wiring money to: Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq, HSBC Bank, sort code 40-06-03, account number 91429574 (London). ■

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BOOKS & THE ARTS

At a Loss for Words

MICHAEL ANDERSON

RALPH ELLISON: A Biography.
By Arnold Rampersad.
Knopf. 657 pp. $35.

Ralph Ellison and alienation: It would seem an obvious pairing. After all, he won his initial acclaim for extending the most fashionable affectation of the 1950s onto black America. Yet he may be better remembered (more esteemed, certainly, in certain circles) for his strenuous advocacy of inclusion, association, interconnection. The paradox is but one of many in a man for whom paradox too often has been mistaken for profundity: a writer who did not write, the expositor of "complexity" whose ideas were simple when not simplistic, the delineator of "chaos" whose commentary was a compendium of complacency, the advocate of social fluidity whose vision was frozen in times past, the proponent of aesthetic discipline whose work is marked by formlessness and lack of control, a "race man" who disdained his race, the critic of sociology whose own novel has been distorted into a sociological cliché, the proponent of individualism whose career was propelled at every step by an astonishing array of selfless supporters, an artist all the more honored the less he produced, a public presence as an invisible man.

"Why couldn't all those things be done at one and the same time?" Ellison asked; why couldn't he be "like all men…ambiguous, limited in circumstance but not in possibility"? His solution adds yet another paradox: The alienated man withdrew even further. As the distinguished scholar Arnold Rampersad suggests in his compassionate yet devastating biography, Ellison's quest to discover "how I can cling to that which is real in me" led him to seize fantasy ("Fiction became the agency of my efforts to answer the questions: Who am I, what am I, how did I come to be?") and, pivotally, to reject identification with his race ("the greatest difficulty for a Negro writer was the problem of revealing what he truly felt, rather than serving up what Negroes were supposed to feel, and were encouraged to feel"). With the subtle insight, painstaking scholarship and elegant presentation that graced his previous biographies of Langston Hughes and Jackie Robinson, Rampersad illuminates the "almost leprous insecurity" that caused Ellison to fall silent as a novelist after the sensational debut of *Invisible Man* in 1952 until his death in 1994, at the age of 81. "As a novelist, he had lost his way," Rampersad writes. "And he had done so in proportion to his distancing himself from his fellow blacks."

COURTESY BEINECKE LIBRARY, YALE UNIVERSITY

"To Langston [Hughes], 'the Dream keeper,' in sincerity and admiration," 1937

Michael Anderson is writing a biography of the playwright Lorraine Hansberry.

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That distance was enormous. "The remarkable series of shrewd cultivations of whites on which Ralph, eager to succeed and optimistic about human nature, would build much of his success" began as early as his senior year in high school. From his affiliation with the Communist Party in the '30s and '40s, through his connections with the New Critics in the '50s (principally Robert Penn Warren, who "quietly, graciously, starting in 1953…had led Ralph to one honor and opportunity after another, as well as to a variety of important relationships with other leading whites in Rome and at the Century, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Yale, and elsewhere"), to the appointments to various official boards and commissions in the '60s and '70s, Ellison was, as Warren and his wife, Eleanor Clark, called him, with affection balancing irony, "every white man's favorite black man."

Ellison's rebuttal, one that has made him a touchstone for contemporary black intellectuals, was that his artistic dedication precluded social activism: "I have no desire to manipulate power. I want to write imaginative books." Rampersad documents why that dog won't hunt. As long as the cause was not black, Ellison was eager to be counted. He was "more than willing to contribute to the work" of the Committee for Cultural Freedom, to join *Partisan Review*'s plea to the Polish Writers' Association to resist "Stalinist terror," to sign open letters of protest against the repeated jailings of the dissident Yugoslavian writer Milovan Djilas and the Chinese invasion of India. "Against racism in America," Rampersad writes, "he signed practically nothing." Even in 1963—the year of the Birmingham church bombing, the March on Washington, the year that saw more than 10,000 public demonstrations against racism—Ellison refused to join "a wide range of artists and religious figures" who signed an open letter to John F. Kennedy calling for action on civil rights.

His aversion did not stop at the border. Offered a trip to Africa in 1955, Ellison rejected the journey made by Richard Wright and James Baldwin: "I said I had no interest in it, no special emotional attachment to the place. I don't read much on Africa nowadays. It is just part of the bigger world picture to me." ("If Ralph ever wrote to or was visited by an African," Rampersad says, "the evidence apparently doesn't exist." Ellison's expensive collection of African art evidently was inspired by reading André Malraux.) In the late 1950s, when Langston Hughes helped collect books to send to Ghana, he reported that all "of the prominent contemporary writers of color in the U.S.A. to whom we wrote" donated volumes—except Ellison. ("He identified himself with the defense of Hungarians, Bulgarians, and other victims of oppression," Rampersad writes, "but was quiet about Africa.") Visiting India in 1957, Ellison attributed Calcutta's poverty to the natives, not European colonialism: "The British simply couldn't have created all of that."

Ellison fashioned himself an artist above politics. But as long as the cause was not black, he was eager to be counted.

Paradox yet again: No black writer benefited more from the civil rights revolution than Ralph Ellison. In the 1940s, the Communist Party boosted him to counter the increasingly estranged Richard Wright, its former black literary star; the party organ, *New Masses*, emblazoned Ellison's name on the cover. Arguably, Ellison's race won him the National Book Award for *Invisible Man*; indisputably it proved his principal social asset, when "invitations arrived at a brisk pace as hosts and hostesses found the Ellisons an engaging, unusual couple with their prestige, poise, intelligence, good looks, and freshly fashionable (in some white circles) brown skins." In the '60s, "civil rights crises across the South led to a dramatic jump in the demand on Ralph for appearances," and "in certain official circles," he became a spokesman: "He was a Negro, he was superbly accomplished, and he was moderate"—so moderate that even speaking at Notre Dame two days after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., "he did not talk about King's death," instead keeping to his text on "The Function of the Novel in American Democracy." (Ellison's opinion of King "had been mixed," Rampersad writes, "especially so after King criticized Johnson's Vietnam policies." King's "morality was too simplistic," Ellison declared.)

Most of all, he wasn't James Baldwin, the scold of America's conscience. In 1964, with an eye on the success of Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, Ellison's publisher had brought out a collection of his pieces, *Shadow and Act*: "an antidote to the more hysterical proclamations coming from the pens of James Baldwin and LeRoi Jones" was a representative reviewer's comment. The next year, when a poll of 200 authors, critics and editors conducted by the *New York Herald Tribune*'s literary magazine, *Book Week*, named *Invisible Man* the best novel of the last two decades, his ascension was confirmed.

The rewards were considerable: membership in the Century Association and the American Academy of Arts and Letters; fellowships at the American Academy in Rome and at Yale University; appointments to the National Council of the Arts, the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission, the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television (followed by a trusteeship of the National Citizens' Committee for Public Television as well as of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts) and the board of Colonial Williamsburg; countless academic offers (in 1974, Harvard offered Ellison a tenured professorship at the highest salary on its arts and science faculty), including nine years in "one of the most prized academic positions in the state, if not the nation," as Albert Schweitzer Professor in the Humanities at New York University; honorary degrees from Wesleyan, Harvard, Williams, Tuskegee, Rutgers, the University of Michigan; France's Chevalier de L'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres; the Medal of Freedom, from Lyndon Johnson in 1969; the first National Medal of the Arts given a writer, from Ronald Reagan in 1985; even an invitation to Truman Capote's fabled Black and White Ball—"a cascading flow of honors such as no other African-American writer had ever enjoyed." This was Ellison the "clubbable monster," in Houston Baker's acidly accurate characterization, who, "when Civil Rights and Black Power became American—indeed global—realities…reclined in butter-soft seats at exclusive Manhattan clubs, explaining to whites why he could not take any active part in the Liberation Politics of black Americans."

Racial treason is a charge inherently ugly as well as intrinsically cheap, all the more when applied yet again to Ellison; as the scholar Jerry Gafio Watts has pointed out, "Ellison has had the rare honor of being attacked by black leftists and black nationalists"—along with influential friends, Ellison had the right enemies. "Much of the criticism directed against Ellison is personal, oversimplified and often not based on an analysis of the man's work and ideas," in the summation of, ironically enough, that most talented of theoreticians in the Black Arts Movement, Larry Neal. Rampersad does not seek to indict him. Rather, along with reckoning the cost, he probes the cause.

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CONTESTED LANDS

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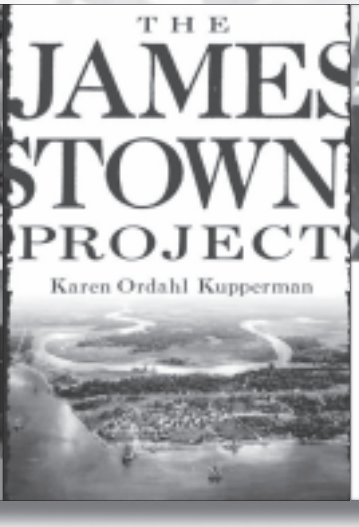

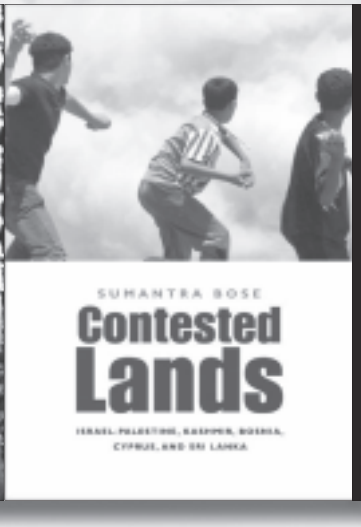

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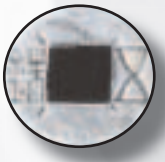

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The defining event in Ellison's life happened when he was 3 years old: His father died. The child was making the rounds with the elder Ellison, a deliveryman, when a block of ice perforated his ulcerated abdomen. "*I had watched, holding on to the cold white metal of the hospital bed as they wheeled him away*," Ellison would recall. "*I had only a glimpse, then we were past*." Sixty years later he would remember, "I was so far from accepting the reality of his death that I was still telling myself that any day he would reappear to take his place as the head of our family." None did in his mother's two subsequent marriages; *Invisible Man* records a series of encounters with failed father figures. He was frozen emotionally—"I have had to rigidly control my thawing, allowing the liquid emotion to escape drop by drop through the trap doors of the things I write, lest I lose control"—and frozen existentially: In his fiction and essays, Ellison strove to escape time and history (think of the apotheosis of the Invisible Man), to return to what was irrevocably lost on that fearsome day in 1916; "haunted," as he said, "by a sense of uncertainty," he would struggle his entire life to quiet what he called "chaos" (his "single most compelling term," as Rampersad writes, "the most burdened word in his cultural vocabulary"). A childhood friend from Oklahoma City remarked: "Ralph's the same way he was when he was a boy. He ain't changed." (Perhaps this is why Rampersad consistently refers to his subject by his first name.) No wonder he always complained he had trouble writing "transitions": "The problem for me is to get from A to B to C."

The immediate consequences of his father's death were devastating. "The new life of poverty started almost at once," Rampersad writes. "Money was always scarce." His widowed mother worked as a maid or a janitor to provide for Ralph and his younger brother, Herbert; at one point, the family was reduced to "a diet of worm-infested beans and day-old milk and bread discarded by a dairy and bakery." They came to depend on the charity of Oklahoma City's black upper crust; its accompanying condescension ("the teachers who made you ashamed and the professionals who thought Herbert and I weren't good enough to play with their children") exacerbated by Ellison's later experience at class-conscious Tuskegee ("a bunch of small minded niggers who won't be satisfied unless they show how important they are.... If I get away from here I am through with negro schools") was at the root of Ellison's rage against the black bourgeoisie, "what he saw," Rampersad writes, "as its shabbily run institutions, its materialism and Philistinism, its snobbery and self-hatred."

In the trajectory familiar from *Invisible Man*, Ellison came to New York in 1936, trading Tuskegee for the Communist Party. Rampersad is particularly penetrating about this crucial decade in Ellison's career, about which "he would never be frank in public" but which set his character for the rest of his life. After the trauma of his childhood and his stinging failure to win distinction as a music student at Tuskegee, he found the basis of his desired identity in the party: a rigid structure to ward off the threat of chaos; social solidarity, particularly with white comrades; a puffed-up reputation of an intellectual, the gift of authority, with which he proclaimed that black writers constituted the vanguard that would allow the masses to "possess the conscious meaning of their lives"; even a mate—Ellison met his first wife in the home of the Communist couple who had provided him shelter. The man who "depended on safety nets—the certitudes of radical ideology and the defensive interests that patrolled it" had found safe harbor. "He probably became, at least for a while, a dues-paying Party member," Rampersad says, but most definitely he remained "something of a Stalinist for years to come," his journalism tortuously following the twists of the party line (as has been documented by the scholar Barbara Foley), standing fast "even when virtually every one of his leftist literary heroes, including Mann, Hemingway, and Malraux" abandoned the party in the wake of the Hitler-Stalin pact. Ellison left the party carrying one of its central Popular Front tenets—"that cultural interchange between the races represented a defining feature of the American experience," in the words of historian Mark Naison—and a style that remained constant, though the principles flipped. If now, as Rampersad writes, "his rhetoric reached new heights of patriotic fervor" ("It is a big, wonderful country," he told *Time* in 1953), if his worshiped triad had changed to Kenneth Burke's "purpose to passion to perception," even as he celebrated "an ideal, interracial American history that really had never been," Ellison remained "self-conscious, solemn, ideological, and ponderous," someone who "searched with the zeal of an autodidact for bits and pieces of knowledge that bolstered his sense of himself as an intellectual."

Ellison's break with Communism freed him to write Invisible Man *but left him existentially unanchored, defenseless against chaos.*

Though Ellison declared, "The break with the c.p. has allowed me to come alive," once again he was existentially unanchored, defenseless against chaos. The evidence is plain, even if too often overlooked, in *Invisible Man*. Perhaps the supreme paradox is that the novel of a man who never tired of excoriating sociological explanations of black life has lent itself to a sociological cliché. "Negroes, in America, are 'invisible men,'" *Library Journal* wrote in 1952; by 1965 Robert Penn Warren could report, "The title has become a key phrase: the Negro is the invisible man." Such a misreading seems to answer a deep need for white America: Even when invisible, all black people look alike.

Ellison's protagonist, with his giddy naïveté, psychological shallowness and sketchy background, is the least representative black figure in American literature—"less a full-blooded character than a convenience of an often symbolic, occasionally surreal plot," as the critic Morris Dickstein has put it. In fact, one of the novel's major flaws is that Ellison's black Candide suddenly shows signs of flesh and blood once he becomes involved in the Brotherhood; the prose loses its ironic lightness and assumes shades of anguish ("At what point do we stop? Is this the new definition, is Brotherhood a matter of sacrificing the weak? If so, at what point do we stop?") and despair ("Only in the Brotherhood had there seemed a chance for such as us, the mere glimmer of a light.... And even that was without meaning"). It is not until he feels betrayed by the Brotherhood that he declares himself invisible, "invisible," as Rampersad points out, "to everyone, black or white."

In his astute commentary on *Invisible Man*, Rampersad, who teaches English and the humanities at Stanford, notes Ellison's technical mistake: "He gives the Brotherhood no plausible reason for deserting the cause of black rights." In life, of course, it was because the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union caused the party to sacrifice black rights in favor of American war efficiency. (Black hard-liners stood fast; for example, three months after the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union, the Harlem Communist leader Benjamin Davis Jr. was claiming that "the CP is disturbed by the increasing struggle of Negroes for jobs in defense

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IRAQ VETS VICTIMS OF THE DRUG WAR

"Guys who wouldn't cry in a combat zone when their best friend was killed, they break down crying in front of me. And they tell me about all they can do now is bounce from job to job, drink, do drugs, and sit home contemplating suicide to end the pain."
– Cpl. Cloy Richards, USMC[1]

Our troops in Iraq have been fighting under conditions described as more dangerous and stressful than Viet Nam.[2] Many have served multiple tours. Ninety percent have been shot at or experienced bombings. Most know somebody who was wounded. One Army study showed that nearly a fifth of combat troops suffer Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).[3]

Incredibly, they can be dishonorably discharged for alcohol related misconduct or illegal drug use even though this self medication was directly related to combat stress. And with a dishonorable discharge, all benefits are cancelled – including treatment for PTSD.[4]

But if the symptoms develop after they come home they may be in for even more grief. The Veterans Administration has a backlog of 600,000 disability cases with an estimated 640,000 to come.[5] This unanticipated flood of casualties means that soldiers who don't have urgent and obvious physical symptoms will just have to get in line.

And while they're waiting for treatment, if they turn to booze or drugs to get through the nights of horror, the VA will often turn them away. Some VA outlets require veterans to be alcohol and drug free for six months before they get treatment.[6]

Failure to provide prompt treatment for all returning troops is an outrage that demands action by Congress.

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plants." The party opposed A. Philip Randolph's proposed March on Washington, the Rubicon for Ellison and many other blacks—though he would publish "ultra-Marxist criticism under a pseudonym even as he was abandoning the radical left." Editors at *New Masses* told Ellison to "soft-pedal this Negro thing. We've got to get production going." Perhaps to placate him, the magazine also started paying him for his articles; as Rampersad notes, "Ralph and black intellectuals like him were more important than ever.") Conspicuous in its absence, the sense of racial betrayal—"If only we had some true friends, some who saw us as more than convenient tools for shaping their own desires!"—makes *Invisible Man* a document of black anti-Communist disillusionment, the fictional analogue to another persistently misread book, Harold Cruse's *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*.

The novel is also a response to Richard Wright. Almost upon Ellison's arrival in New York, Wright had elevated the Oklahoma yokel through the heady atmosphere of black Communist literary life, commissioning his first book review and first piece of fiction, discussing and recommending books, sharing his own writings. The former lonely, fatherless child who had lost himself in books—the segregated branch of the Oklahoma City library had been "a boon to Ralph," Rampersad writes; "Novels fed his chronic daydreaming" ("I read *Last of the Mohicans* ten times")—found a soul mate in another once fatherless (through desertion, not death) and solitary child, who recalled, "Whenever my environment had failed to support or nourish me, I had clutched at books." Is it any surprise that Ellison so closely modeled his early attempts at fiction on Wright's that Wright responded, "You have copied my ideas, my words and my structure"?

"The sons must slay the fathers"—Wright's other protégé, James Baldwin, even more sadly orphaned than Ellison (his father unknown, himself shamefully illegitimate), spoke for the two of them, case studies in the anxiety of influence. Indeed, both sought to slay Wright, as a cultural figure (Baldwin strove to be a *moraliste* in the French manner; Ellison succeeded in becoming a cultural mandarin American-style) and as a fiction writer; each created his own version of that specter haunting black American literature, Bigger Thomas. As in his efforts to be an extra-literary figure, Baldwin failed, with Rufus Scott in *Another Country*; Ellison subversively turned Bigger into a comic figure in *Invisible Man*.

For all its disparities in style, tone and theme, Ellison's novel shares striking similarities with Wright's *Native Son*, not only in plot details—each protagonist suffers excruciating sexual temptation from a white woman, each spurns a speech exhorting him to join a social movement, each flees police over rooftops, each takes an automobile ride with Communists, each rejects a maternal figure—but also as a description of an individual consciousness (the tirelessly repeated allegations, including many by Ellison, that Wright wrote partisan propaganda ignores his authorial insistence on Bigger's individuality: "He looked at the other black people near him. Even though black like them, he felt there was too much difference between him and them to allow for a common binding and a common life"), one that rejects imposed social identities and attempts its own definition of authenticity. (Both novels also share drastic flaws in structure, with some episodes threatening to unbalance the whole; and both suffer from what Baldwin proposed was the void at the heart of black novels, that violence resided where sex should be: Bigger's sexual stirrings are followed by two murders, the Invisible Man's by the Battle Royale and the Harlem riot.) For all his denials, Ellison obviously took his main image from Wright's novella *The Man Who Lived Underground* ("the first time," Wright wrote his agent, "I've really tried to step beyond the straight black-white stuff"). And Ellison's pastiche style, his self-conscious literary allusiveness—"the possibility of creating depth and resonance in my fiction by taking the gambler's chance of alluding to things I'd read in the Bible, in literary classics, scientific works, folklore, or to anything else that might be conveyed through the written word"—had its predecessor not only in Ellison's oft-cited reading of *The Waste Land* but closer to home, or the Harlem office of the *Daily Worker*, where Wright labored over his first effort at a novel. "Modernist in its bleak, despairing tone," Rampersad writes, the book, posthumously published as *Lawd Today!*, "bristles with devices lifted from contemporary writers such as James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Theodore Dreiser, and James T. Farrell."

Having alienated himself from black America in the name of his art, Ellison became alienated from the wellspring of his creativity.

Both Bigger Thomas and the Invisible Man proclaim that they have achieved identity, each in what could be argued is a nihilistic victory—but what a contrast in tone! Bigger shouts, "I didn't want to kill! But what I killed for, I *am*!" Surrounded by his 1,369 light bulbs, the Invisible Man says smugly, "I am one of the most irresponsible beings that ever lived.... And wait until I reveal how truly irresponsible I am." As Ellison so often and so proudly announced, he was not a protest writer; what could be considered the most metaphysically despairing opening line in American literature, "I am an invisible man," is said not in revolt but with pride.

As Rampersad emphasizes, Ellison was not writing biography in *Invisible Man*. Instead, he was creating his own myth: a black youngster, innocent and idealistic ("I visualized myself as a potential Booker T. Washington"), cruelly victimized by a cynical black college ("You're nobody, son. You don't exist—can't you see that?"), deracinated in New York ("coming North was a jump into the unknown"), given prominence by the Communist Party ("I found that most downtown audiences seemed to expect some unnamed something whenever I appeared"), only to feel betrayed once again—not only by the party but by the indifference of the masses ("It didn't matter because they didn't realize just what had happened, neither my hope nor my failure. My ambition and integrity were nothing to them") and forced to confront his barely suppressed dread of existential annihilation ("the traitor self that always threatened internal discord"). In the riot that engulfs Harlem, the Invisible Man is presented with a vision of senselessness—"The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity"—and the ultimate temptation is surrender, a temptation that Ellison named Rinehart: "Rine the rascal was at home. Perhaps *only* Rine the rascal was at home in it." As Rampersad writes, the Invisible Man has become "chaos incarnate."

"A crisis of spirit and technique haunts this last section" of *Invisible Man*, Rampersad writes. "The book was not finished. Ralph needed to add something in order to reassert a final measure of control over his epic." The novel's epilogue imposes a meaning not justified by what precedes it; Rampersad joins a host of previous commentators in pointing out how undefined are the "infinite possibilities" the Invisible Man claims for himself. How could they be? This lack of definition was what Ellison called "complexity" ("Ralph was ever

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so fond of the word 'complexity,'" his friend the poet Richard Wilbur told Rampersad. "I think that his favorite expression was the 'complexity of the American experience'"); yet for Ellison "complexity" was the flip side of "chaos." It was where he found his creative freedom—as he wrote of Rinehart, "His world was possibility and he knew it. He was years ahead of me and I was a fool"—yet it also carried his deepest emotional danger: "Creative experience," he wrote to Albert Murray, brought "only a fighting chance with the chaos of living."

A final paradox: In the end Ralph Ellison was alienated even from the wellspring of his creativity. His muse pulled him toward the sort of creation ("Despite the historical past and the injustices of the present," he once said, "I have to *affirm* my forefathers and I *must* affirm my parents or be reduced in my own mind to a white man's inadequate—even if unprejudiced—conception of human complexity") his will and his psyche would not permit him to sustain. Though the sections of *Invisible Man* dealing with the Brotherhood are the most emotionally felt, the ones with the greatest artistic power—Trueblood with his ribald tale of incest, the mental patients in the Golden Day, the nightmarish Harlem riot—describe a world gone mad. Norman Mailer, in his notorious "Quick and Expensive Comments" on his fellow writers, hit a bull's-eye when he judged that "Ellison's mind, fine and icy, tuned to the pitch of a major novelist's madness, is not always adequate to mastering the forms of rage, horror, and disgust which his eyes have presented to his experience, and so he is forever tumbling from the heights of pure satire into the nets of a murderously depressed clown." That Ellison was not fitted for the art he professed to admire is his pathos. He sought to be the black T.S. Eliot when he could have been the black Beckett. ■

The Dread Zone

JOHN LEONARD

FALLING MAN. By Don DeLillo. Scribner. 246 pp. $26.

Beckett is the last writer to shape the way we think and see. After him, the major work involves midair explosions and crumbled buildings. This is the new tragic narrative.

—Don DeLillo, Mao II

It wasn't a question of whether Don DeLillo would write a 9/11 novel, or even when. He has been writing it all along, from *Americana* to *Cosmopolis*, dreaming out loud in signs, ciphers, portents and premonitions. The superstructure and the manifest content may have been about money and media, or baseball and rock and roll, or language and religion, or prophets and pilgrims, or paranoia and pornography, or atomic bombs and dead Kennedys, but some kind of 9/11 was always implicit. DeLillo, the conspiracy theorist of corporate power and state secrecy, the poster child of postmodern pastiche and "crisis sociology," the Rob Roy and Pancho Villa of blood cults and bricolage, the dreadlocked Medusa of "topless pinball" and "neon creepies," is afraid of the dark. "BREATHE! GLEAM! VERBALIZE! DIE!" he instructed us in *Ratner's Star*. *The Names* actually accused the ancient Minoans, with their lilies, dolphins, antelope and bull, of human sacrifice.

"But that's why you built the towers, isn't it?" says Martin, a know-it-all in *Falling Man*. "Weren't the towers built as fantasies of wealth and power that would one day become fantasies of destruction? You build a thing like that so you can see it come down. The provocation is obvious. What other reason would there be to go so high and then to double it, do it twice? It's a fantasy, so why not do it twice? You are saying, Here it is, bring it down."

There are five important characters in *Falling Man*—Keith, a Wall Street lawyer who walks down the stairs of the North Tower and "out of an ash storm, all blood and slag, reeking of burnt matter, with pinpoint glints of slivered glass in his face"; Lianne, Keith's estranged wife, a freelance book editor and "storyline" facilitator at an East Harlem therapy group for early-onset Alzheimer's patients; their young son, Justin, who restricts himself to monosyllables and spends a lot of time at his bedroom window looking through binoculars for the monster named Bill Lawton; Hammad, one of the hijackers in the service of Mohamed Atta and maybe the least interesting terrorist we've ever met in a DeLillo novel; and Janiak, a performance artist who in the days after 9/11 is seen throwing himself in a suit, tie and safety harness off of window sills, viaducts and elevated subway tracks, "the single falling figure that trails a collective dread"—and Martin's not among them. He is, instead, one of those percussion instruments in every DeLillo, a drum, a tambourine or a triangle to be struck with a stick whenever the writer needs to sound a foreboding or to counterpoint or caricature an argument. This particular Martin is a Eurotrashy art dealer who used to be a Marxist revolutionary back in the jolly bygone days of the Red Brigades. He is intended to remind us that once upon a time the terrorists were white, Western and left-wing secular.

As if readers of DeLillo needed reminding. Long before Al Qaeda, he had introduced us to the "mindless violence" of the Happy Valley Farm Commune in *Great Jones Street*, the funny money of the Radial Matrix in *Running Dog* and the serial alphabet killers of Ta Onómata in *The Names*. It was in the same *Names*, a quarter of a century ago, that he explained that America, with its bank loans, arms credits, goods and technology, "is the world's living myth":

> There's no sense of wrong when you kill an American or blame America for some local disaster. This is our function, to be character types, to embody recurring themes that people can use to comfort themselves, justify themselves and so on. We're here to accommodate. Whatever people need, we provide. A myth is a useful thing. People expect us to absorb the impact of their grievances.

From the beginning, his radar eye and sonar ear have been on red alert for a toppling of towers in "the terror that came blowing through the fog." He told us in his first novel, *Americana* (1971), that there would be no agonies in the garden when the century turned: "Now that night beckons, the first lamp to be lit will belong to that man who leaps from a cliff and learns how to fly, who soars to the tropics of the sun and uncurls his hand from his breast to spoon out fire." *Ratner's Star* (1976) then explained that "nothing in this ancient

John Leonard, a Nation *contributing editor, writes on books every month for* Harper's *and on television every week for* New York *magazine.*

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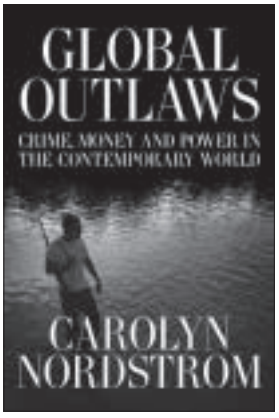

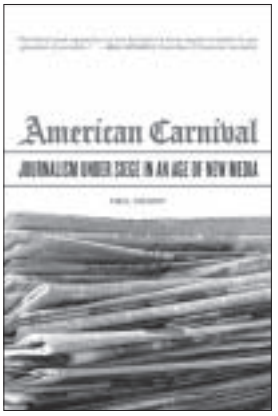

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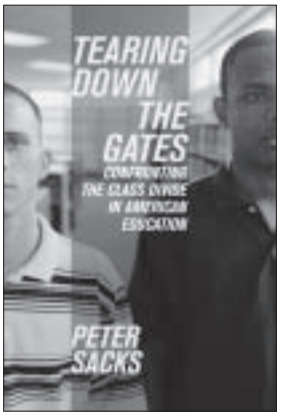

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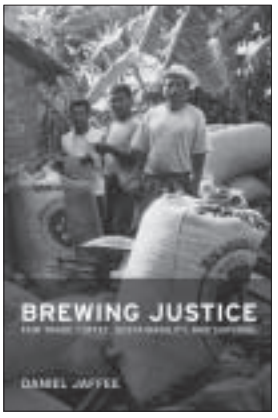

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poem of matter falling precludes the notion that matter continues to fall. Matter is now thought to be organized, interactive and guided by well-defined forces and yet nowhere in the scientific canon is there evidence to dispel the poetic impression that matter-now-organized is constantly falling, which is what I said in the previous sentence if you were listening. It's in the nature of objects to fall. The whole universe is falling. This is the meaning of dreams in which we plunge forever." *Great Jones Street* (1973) had already predicted:

> In a millennium or two, a seeming paradox of our civilization will be best understood by those men versed in the methods of counter-archaeology. They will study us not by digging into the earth but by climbing vast dunes of industrial rubble and mutilated steel, seeking to reach the tops of our buildings. Here they'll chip lovingly at our spires, mansards, turrets, parapets, belfries, water tanks, flower pots, pigeon lofts and chimneys.... Back in their universities in the earth, the counter-archaeologists will sort their reasons for our demise, citing as prominent the fact that we stored our beauty in the air, for birds of prey to see, while placing at eye level nothing more edifying than hardware, machinery and the implements of torture.

After which Pammy would wonder in *Players* (1977): "If the elevators in the World Trade Center were places, as she believed them to be, and if the lobbies were spaces, as she further believed, what then was the World Trade Center itself? Was it a condition, an occurrence, a physical event, an existing circumstance, a presence, a state, a set of invariables?" *The Names* (1982) maintained that "nothing sticks to us but smoke in our hair and clothes. It is dead time. It never happened until it happens again. Then it never happened." To which *White Noise* (1985) added: "The power of the dead is that we think they see us all the time. The dead have a presence. Is there a level of energy composed solely of the dead? They are also in the ground, of course, asleep and crumbling. Perhaps we are what they dream." To be sure, as David Ferrie insisted in *Libra* (1988), "There's more to it. There's always more to it. This is what history consists of. It's the sum total of all the things they aren't telling us." Nevertheless, according to *Mao II* (1991):

> It's such a simple idea. Terrorize the innocent. The more heartless they are, the better we see their rage. And isn't it the novelist, Bill, above all people, above all writers, who understands this rage, who knows in his soul what the terrorist thinks and feels? Through history it's the novelist who has felt affinity for the violent man who lives in the dark. Where are your sympathies? With the colonial police, the occupier, the rich landlord, the corrupt government, the militaristic state? Or with the terrorist?

One character in *Underworld* (1997) "loved the way power rises out of self-caressing secrecy to become a roar in the sky." Another, stalking a billionaire on the streets of Manhattan in *Cosmopolis* (2003), sought our advice: "I'm ambivalent about killing him. Does this make me less interesting to you, or more?" A third, in the play *The Day Room*, had bragged all the way back in 1986 that "I live in a great steel tower that reflects the blazing sun. People catch fire just walking by. The more bodies that pile up around you, the greater your equity, the stronger your power, the longer you live. This is the point of living in a high rise. To see the bodies pile up at sunset, the nostalgic hour, the hour of summing up, stirring the cocktails, feeling the great tower sway in the hot winds."

From DeLillo, cryptic and reclusive, we have come to expect these bulletins from zones of dread—about memory, mystery, movies, myth and apparition. About private armies, intelligence networks, back channels and terrorist sects. About violence, conspiracy, coincidence, chaos and the loneliness of long-distance lunatics. About soot-faced pushers of shopping carts, sleepers in tents and subway tunnels, missing children on milk cartons and women who live in garbage bags "like some Bombay cartoon." About wave fronts, labyrinths, spycams, video streams, digital mosaics and magnetic flash. About sacred formulas, circular systems, cycloid forms, rogue programs, sequence grids, dark matter and boomerangs. About, alas, stun guns, rubber bullets, polygraphs, caliber readings and death squads. But also about speaking in tongues, playing with snakes, animist spores, Buddhist swastikas, Kabbalistic sperm demons, hermaphroditic Hindu doll gods, Roman Catholic rosary beads, the ninety-nine names for Allah in the Koran, goat bells, wild poppies and avant-garde mathematics. Endor told us in *Ratner's Star*: "Einstein and Kafka! They knew each other! They stood in the same room and talked! Einstein and Kafka!"

In fact, some Endor or Fenig or Owen or Martin is always hitting us between the eyes with something DeLillo thinks we need to know. We will be informed: "If it's Nazis, it's automatically erotic. The violence, the rituals, the leather, the jackboots. The whole thing for uniforms and paraphernalia." Or: "I don't trust anybody's nostalgia but my own. Nostalgia is a product of dissatisfaction and rage. It's a settling of grievances between the present and the past. The more powerful the nostalgia, the closer you come to violence. War is the form nostalgia takes when men are hard-pressed to say something good about their country." Or, and this may really be profound: "Before pop art, there was such a thing as bad taste. Now there's kitsch, schlock, camp and porn."

And the way the men and women talk to each other—omniscient, ironic and ominous—you'd think Beckett or Pinter had written their scripts. Whole marriages are hung out to dry, like knickers or negatives on a line. This can be funny, as it was in *The Names* when the filmmaker Volterra said of his girlfriend: "Look at her. Those oversized glasses. With her thin face and that short hair.... She looks like a science-fiction insect." To which she cleverly replied: "Suck a rock, Jojo." But more often it's right on an almost invisible line between tickling and exploratory surgery, or surgery and torture. In *Falling Man*, Keith and Lianne know each other so well that they have to keep reminding themselves of what must not be said so as to get them safely through the day, as if they, too, dangled from some viaduct. He will fail to inform her of the weird affair he's having across town with Florence, the young black woman whose briefcase he mysteriously removed from the burning World Trade tower. Once he's at home again, "alone in time," strange to himself, what Keith does mostly is watch. Lianne, whose father shot himself rather than face senile dementia, won't tell her husband how scared she gets in the therapy group at "the first signs of halting response, the losses and failings, the grim prefigurings that issued now and then from a mind beginning to slide away from the adhesive fiction that makes an individual possible." Instead, she gets into a fight with the downstairs neighbor who, over and over again, plays the same CD of "music located in Islamic tradition"—"Middle Eastern, North African, Bedouin songs perhaps or Sufi dances." He watches poker on television, from a casino in a desert, and wonders whether "he was born to be old, meant to be old and alone.... Everything now is measured by after." She thinks his exercises for his wounded wrist "resembled prayer in some remote northern province, among a repressed people, with periodic applications of ice." Once, together, they watch what happened on television:

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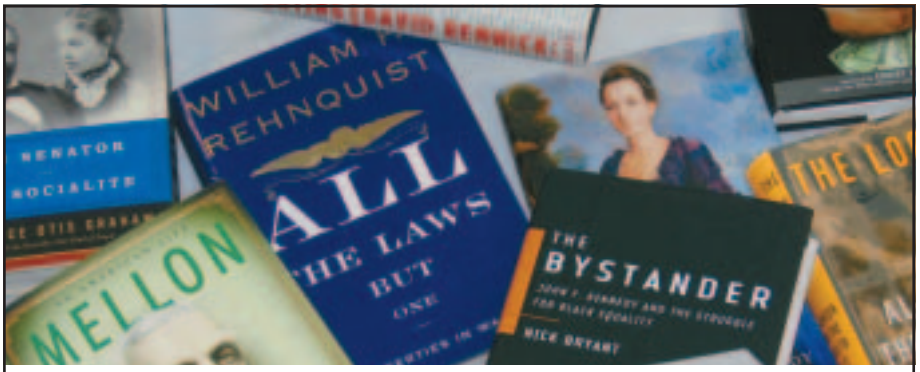
> The second plane coming out of that ice blue sky, this was the footage that entered the body, that seemed to run beneath her skin, the fleeting sprint that carried lives and histories, theirs and hers, everyone's, into some other distance, out beyond the towers.

He agrees that even the camera seemed surprised by the first plane. But by the time of the second, "We're all a little older and wiser." And God's name must have been on the tongues of killers and victims both.

Obviously, we can read DeLillo backward, as if his detective novels, science fictions, road shows, espionage thrillers, academic hanky-pankies and hockey porn were warming up for *Falling Man*—a novel that reminds us of how we really felt before we were bushwhacked; of our fugue state on that election day, in the endless nightmare feedback loop of jet plane, firebomb, towers falling, another in a long line of cheesy Hollywood films in which the crystal palace of Manhattan is destroyed by comets, plagues, apes, aliens, insects, androids, hydrogen bombs, tidal waves or toxic waste. Yet on the strange parenthetical streets outside, silent but for sirens Tuesday night and Wednesday, in the compulsive cluster of people on the streets walking to air the mind, there was behind the eyes a kind of inner Beirut, the rubble left behind by the kamikazes of Kingdom Come. If the contemptuous purpose of terrorism is to dominate and humiliate, to turn citizens into lab rats and cities into mazes, then Al Qaeda did not succeed. But we certainly couldn't say that the bombs had scattered seeds of anything savory or uplifting. We really needed time to think. Unfortunately, the event was hijacked immediately by putschniks.

DeLillo returns us to that parenthesis. In this, among the 9/11 novels I have read, by Ian McEwan, Reynolds Price, Jay McInerney and Jonathan Safran Foer, it most resembles the best of them, Lynn Sharon Schwartz's *The Writing on the Wall*, in which, after the divebombing of the World Trade Center, a linguist named Renata at the New York Public Library is asked to add Arabic to her other exotic languages (Bliondan, Etinoi), even as she tries to cope with a crazy mother, an importunate lover, a teenage mute, a dead twin and the child she thinks she lost on a merry-go-round. In both books, the melding of the psychological and geopolitical dreamworlds feels inevitable rather than willed, as starkly elegant and illuminated as the calligraphy of medieval monks. DeLillo, predictably, goes further. He has practiced overkill in



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Underworld, that treatise on the cold war and other repressions. He has practiced performance yoga in *The Body Artist*, that pure blue note of Zen. Secrets are the normal respiration of his intelligence, and so is fearfulness, and so, too, is a cry for pity and saving grace. That history and intimacy should collide with and collapse upon each other, like charged particles in the cloud chamber of a cyclotron, has been fundamental to his method and his metaphysics.

So Hammad will have second thoughts, a bit late, and rather less persuasively than John Updike's New Jersey teen in *Terrorist*. At least Updike, who takes sacred texts as seriously as he does medicine, has written already on Gilgamesh, the Mahabharata and the Analects, and exerted himself to think about Abraham and Isaac in the inflections of Dante and Kierkegaard, will mount the Prophet's winged horse Buraq and ride with the robed warriors and the elephants into the Koran's crushing fire. So Justin, three years after his father didn't die, will march with his mother in an antiwar parade on Charlie Parker's birthday. So Keith, who "could not find himself in the things he saw and heard," "in the ash ruins of what was various and human," will run away from "the dream of paralysis," "the dream of asphyxiation," "the dream of helplessness" and any breath of God as well—into the limbic wastes of professional poker, where he gets to choose yes or no with the turn of every card, call or fold. (We have been here before with DeLillo, haven't we, in *Players*, where the Stock Exchange is a Temple Mount, and money moves in green numbers and deathless waves across the floor; and in *Cosmopolis*, where the mathematical properties of sunflower seeds and deep-space pulsars describe currency fluctuations, and the cycles of grasshopper breeding and the almighty market are interchangeable?) Whereas Lianne has tried hard to fight off the God of her fathers and mothers, "because once you believe such a thing…then how can you escape, how survive the power of it, is and was and ever shall be." She finds herself nevertheless "breathing the dead in candlewax and incense," dreaming toward something "at the limits of matter and energy, a force responsible in some way for the very nature, the vibrancy of our lives from the mind out, the mind in little pigeon blinks that extend the plane of being, out beyond logic and intuition." Besides, "isn't it the world itself that brings you to God? Beauty, grief, terror, the empty desert, the Bach cantatas."

From dense light and mauled stones, DeLillo, a closet holy roller, writes a radiant sermon. Meanwhile America, having lapsed into a "protein stupor" like one of the East Harlem Alzheimer's patients, has forgotten where she came from and who she was supposed to be.

But you are wondering about Janiak, the performance artist, the falling man, the Humpty Dumpty. Let me suggest, if not Adam, then possibly Icarus. ■

The Brown Decades

RACHEL COHEN

CHANCE AND CIRCUMSTANCE: Twenty Years With Cage and Cunningham.
By Carolyn Brown. Knopf. 645 pp. $37.50.

Carolyn Brown first saw Merce Cunningham dance in a master class in Denver in April 1951. She remembers him demonstrating a fall, "swiftly arching back like a bow as he raised his left arm overhead and sinking quietly to the floor on his left hand," then "rising on his knees to fall flat out like a priest at the foot of the cross," before rolling over and "arriving on his feet again." The technique—Cunningham had been relentlessly developing his own movement since leaving Martha Graham's company seven years earlier—was of unusual "speed and elegance, suppressed passion and catlike stealth," and, Brown added, "my imitative dancer's mind was caught short." She and her husband, composer Earle Brown, were then in their early 20s, living off waiting tables and teaching, trying very hard to think about art in a way that felt alive and laying plans to go to California, where Earle hoped to study with Arnold Schoenberg. When Cunningham and John Cage arrived in town to do a lecture-demonstration, they seemed to the Browns a force at once delightful and visionary. Earle Brown wrote down everything they could remember of the hours they had spent in fascinated conversation with Cage, who had already begun to explore the use of chance operations in composition, simultaneous independence in performance and certain Eastern aesthetics. The Browns' first impressions of Cunningham had less to do with what he said than how he moved. "My first memory of Merce," Earle Brown wrote some twenty years later, "is seeing his eyes follow Carol in diagonals across the studio floor of Jane McLean's loft in Denver."

Carolyn Brown was not at that time sure she wanted to be a dancer. Her mother, Marion Stevens Rice, was a well-known Denishawn dancer, and Brown had grown up in the repertory of Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn, so fundamental to all subsequent modern American dance and especially to Martha Graham. The possibilities suggested by Cunningham—the sense of the muscles themselves as at once faceted and fluid, in movement and stillness always in complex and evolving relationships—were to her compelling. In college Brown had studied philosophy and aesthetics, and dance alone was still not entirely satisfy-

JAMES KLOSTY

Carolyn Brown in *Canfield*, 1969

Rachel Cohen is the author of A Chance Meeting: Intertwined Lives of American Writers and Artists, 1854–1967 *(Random House).*

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ing. "I needed a reason," she explains, "a philosophical raison d'être—for a life in dance to which to devote myself. It was John Cage who provided that." And it is the life in dance that Brown did in fact find through these two artists that is the subject of her wonderful new book, *Chance and Circumstance: Twenty Years With Cage and Cunningham*. Though she modestly never says so, reading her book, one realizes that Carolyn Brown's body carries within it an accumulated history of nearly the whole century of modern American dance.

Schoenberg's death in 1951 decided the Browns on New York. They arrived the following year, and Carolyn Brown began taking Cunningham's classes and was asked to be part of the group of dancers who went down to Black Mountain College for the crucial 1953 summer formation of Merce Cunningham and Company. Her book gives vivid descriptions of the storied moments of 1950s avant-garde life: the unveiling of Rauschenberg's red paintings, the early Happenings, the Judson Dance Theater. Throughout, Brown achieves the difficult balance of reticence about other people's private lives (she maintains a very affectionate circumspection about the fifty-year relationship between Cunningham and Cage, for example) and clear-eyed honesty about her own. We watch her and her friends moving among the landmarks of those days: the Orentalia bookshop on Twelfth Street; Jasper Johns's loft on Pearl Street, and Rauschenberg's upstairs; the "Bozza Mansion" on Monroe Street, where Cage had his austere rooms and Morton Feldman lived on a lower floor; and Cunningham's rented studio in Sheridan Square. The Browns found a loft on Third Avenue between Ninth and Tenth—from the front windows they watched the El rattling past; from the back they could see de Kooning at work in his studio.

The life, though exhilarating, was not easy: The apartment was cold, the neighborhood unsafe, Earle Brown was often away on tour and the work was perpetual. Carolyn Brown was in dance class two or three times a day. She, like many other Cunningham dancers, found that what supported and supplemented her work were the classical ballet classes of Margaret Craske and Antony Tudor. One of the great pleasures of Brown's book is the chance to live, briefly, in imagination, the life of a dancer; in her beautiful descriptions of classes and teaching, we can begin to see how a dancer forms herself in daily practice: "ballet…did not train the torso to twist, curve, tilt, attack percussively, or train the dancer to move various parts in isolation, nor did it train a dancer to fall and recover from a fall in a variety of ways. Cunningham's own classes attempt to teach all these moves." Even now, Cunningham's unusual, nearly impossible combined positions are a challenge to the viewer's kinesthetic sense in much the way dissonance challenges the ear.

There is something terribly engaging in the story of Brown's fight for mastery—with what sympathy I followed her progress—a young woman, though in the main encouraged and supported by her husband and parents, still very alone in the world. She felt in part trapped in the glamour and elegance of her own body; she still remembers with some pain her adored mentor Cage saying to her, "You're so decorative." She felt she was too prim in her dancing, too concerned with perfect lines. She would grow furious with herself—"how incapable I was…of jettisoning certain of my puritanical notions about movement"—and finish rehearsal or the rare performance in towering frustration. This struggle with perfectionism, I think, was one of the manifestations of the philosophical idealism that was a central motivation for her work.

Brown was a walk-on for the Sadler's

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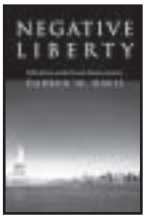

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Wells Ballet and the opera at the old Metropolitan Opera House, and she was in the corps de ballet at Radio City Music Hall, but mostly she kept turning down other work and it kept turning her down, and, a part of virtually every single thing he choreographed, she became more and more wholly a Cunningham dancer. Though famously and sometimes frustratingly aloof, Cunningham—in those years giving classes every day for meager financial survival—was, Brown felt, a master teacher, and, slowly, breakthroughs came. After seven years of working together, Cunningham showed Brown her solo for *Crises*:

> My impression of it was only of his tremendous vitality, speed, and wildness. I think he purposely blurred the actual steps, forcing me into a way of moving beyond my experience at that time. My usual inclination had always been to want to know precisely what Merce wanted me to do, but on this particular occasion, I didn't want to know the steps—I wanted desperately to be the wildness.

In the beginning, the Cunningham company appeared very infrequently—six or seven performances a year, mostly in regional theaters, often on wretched stages where they were lucky not to get injured. Consistently ignored by New York critics (much to the frustration of Cage, then acting as company manager), they were a sort of stepchild presence for several summers at the Connecticut College American Dance Festival, where at least they had time and space to develop repertory. Of their few performances, most were in Europe (Brown's photos of their European triumphs are a pleasure to view), and it wasn't until a world tour in 1964 with a monthlong, wildly successful season in London that the Cunningham company at last established a firm reputation.

By this time, the personnel of the company had transformed; after twelve years the only remaining original dancers were Carolyn Brown and Viola Farber (Farber left at the end of the 1964 tour). There are moments in the book, as there were in Brown's dancing life, when she also tired of the company and the energy of zestful discovery wanes: "Confession: the dances choreographed during my last eighteen months in the company left no residual muscle memory from which to elucidate content or qualities." But if in the last third of the book one occasionally senses the obligatory record, there remains throughout a sense of her continually reaching new heights as a dancer and interpreter.

For Carolyn Brown, those first seven years of grueling American touring were the most splendid. In 1956 Cage took the money he had won appearing as an expert on mushrooms on an Italian television quiz show and used it to buy a VW bus, which fit nine. By the end the regular cast included: Cunningham; Cage; David Tudor, pianist and contemporary musician extraordinaire; Brown; four other dancers; and Robert Rauschenberg, who was designing sets, lights and costumes (he worked on more than twenty Cunningham dances). They cooked out in parks, got caught in snow storms, ate uproariously and lived in the atmosphere created by "the mischievous" Rauschenberg and Cage's "unsquelchable optimism." Rauschenberg's description of the "VW days" is Brown's favorite, and she quotes it, wistfully, at a number of points in her book: "Life and art were one." She had one abiding regret about this period: that Cunningham, who loved to perform, was only to be seen in these infrequent regional engagements, and some of the greatest years in the performing life of one of the greatest of American dancers passed almost entirely offstage.

The recorded evidence of the early years is slight—these last weeks I've sat rapt before the few soundless films preserved at the Performing Arts Library, work so fine one feels foolish to praise it—and, even still, as Brown very properly points out, "dance on television… can never equate with a living, breathing body on a stage." Many of the important Cunningham works were never or poorly recorded when danced by him and the dancers for whom the pieces were developed—he himself wrote down complete notes for only one work, *Rune*, and later had real difficulty deciphering them. There are two excellent sources on Cunningham's work: Jacqueline Lesschaeve's interviews with Cunningham (*The Dancer and the Dance*, 1985) and *Merce Cunningham*, edited by James Klosty, who, after she and Earle Brown separated, became Carolyn Brown's lifetime companion. (Klosty also took the extraordinary photographs used in Brown's memoir.)

But reviews of performances were often uncomprehending; a book of Cunningham's, *Changes: Notes on Choreography*, was printed so badly that it's extremely hard to read; few of the dancers kept records. We should be enormously grateful to Carolyn Brown, who kept a thorough diary, wrote and saved and quotes from copious letters to her family and Earle Brown, painstakingly combed through

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the material record, and interviewed the other dancers and those associated with the company. Her book is and will remain one of the few and best to read for insight into the workings of this very complex and important artistic creation—Merce Cunningham and Company.

Take, for example, Brown's description of *Rune* ("if a performer can judge accurately from within, *Rune* felt like a masterpiece"), which is particularly helpful in imagining the physical process of the rehearsal work:

> We worked without music, which was usual, and without mirror, which was not, learning the dance together by breathing as one, sensing one another's phrasing, accents, and dynamics. One had to have eyes in the back of one's head, so to speak, and to develop an acute sense of time. In the beginning, it was maddeningly difficult. Four distinctly different dancers, whose natural affinity for particular movement qualities and phrasing could scarcely have been more diverse, had to be melded into one complementary unit.

Ways of expressing in movement the peculiarities of the body's relationship to time are among the most mysterious and suggestive of Cunningham's discoveries. "Merce worked with the stopwatch from the belief that rhythm comes out of the nature of the movement itself and the movement nature of the individual dancer," Brown wrote in a wonderful essay in Klosty's book. "In his classes in composition he gives problems relating to time awareness. For example: make three phrases and do them in one minute. Do the same three phrases in two minutes. Do the same three phrases in thirty seconds." The dancers could reliably rehearse a fifteen-minute piece to within an accuracy of ten seconds. "The muscular memory has a built-in time sense," she explained. "It can go awry, of course. But it can be spectacularly accurate when developed."

With this principle—as Edwin Denby, the dance critic who mattered most to Merce Cunningham, once put it, of how "a dance phrase holds together by its rhythm in time"—dance is understood on its own terms and not in relationship to music, a key element of the Cunningham and Cage philosophy, and one to which Carolyn Brown strongly subscribes. The idea, though radical, also has its continuities with the classical tradition of dance. It is part of Brown's intention to underscore that the tenets of Cage and Cunningham have often been misunderstood as a sort of "anything-goes" carelessness and misused by performers and creators as a result. I have come away with the feeling that, for Cunningham, using chance procedures was a way of creating for himself ever more complex rigors, which the dancers' bodies accommodate and resist in ways that allow beauty to develop on the stage. Cunningham's extremely mathematical mind—what one guesses is an almost instantaneous ability to seize and calculate visual impressions—means that even using incredibly elaborate chance procedures or, later, computer-generated patterns, it still was true, as he says, that "working on it with the dancers I would see how it could move through the space." Often Brown did her own research in order to fathom the depths of a Cunningham work, and at least one of her earlier published interpretations has become standard. "Again and again," Brown writes, "I feel it is necessary to insist that there *is* meaning in every Cunningham dance, but the meaning cannot be translated into words; it must be experienced kinesthetically through the language of movement."

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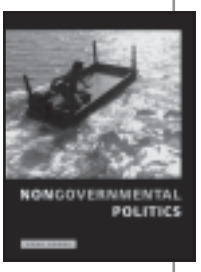

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One feels sure that it was the pleasure and sustenance of this deep and careful artistic work that kept Carolyn Brown in the Cunningham company longer than any other dancer, for twenty years, until her retirement in 1972. With a mind and spirit akin to those of Cunningham and Cage, Brown had been vital to the work. "It made a profound change," Cunningham said years later of her departure. "It was then that I made *Changing Steps* for the Company—she had gone and I'm not in it." The scene of her last performance in her own book is moving. Brown quotes from the diary entry Cunningham made that night: "'So beautiful,' I said to her, 'I never told you enough.'"

One of the great roles that Cunningham made for Brown was in *Walkaround Time* (1968), a tribute to Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*. Characteristically, she studied Duchamp's publication about the work, *The Green Box*, for clues. With Duchamp's approval, Jasper Johns built the translucent cubes that are carried about the stage during the dance and at the end assembled as in the original artwork. All the dancers move among them with delicacy and austerity, but Brown's work is at the center of the piece. Merce Cunningham, in a rare extended comment, said in one of his interviews with Jacqueline Lesschaeve:

> *Walkaround Time* was made also with Carolyn Brown very clearly in mind, the images she produced. The solo she danced in such a luminous way was central to the first half of the work. There was one movement she did, which I had not choreographed, but knowing Carolyn, I realized it was there for a reason, not decoration. I watched and understood. She needed it to support herself getting from one complicated balance to the succeeding one. It came out of necessity. It was beautiful and expressive.

One has the sense, watching what can still be seen of her performance on film, that this role is built, in a deep and transformed way, on the struggle of Carolyn Brown to handle a control so perfect it might be mechanical without losing freedom and fluidity. There is a moment when she suddenly raises her left shoulder toward her immobile face and slowly lowers it again, in which seems to hang the very knowledge of what it is to live in the human body in a mechanized world. Her bride's floating turns, full of innocence and experience; her incredible ability to change the speed of the rhythms of her body, so that in stillness you still feel movement that can then begin to be visible at seemingly any speed; the sense of the lines of her movement extending into space—all this work of a lifetime of dance shows very quietly and extremely powerfully and stays attenuated within her at the end, when Merce Cunningham, with a beautiful matter-of-fact tenderness, bends to lift her and carries her offstage. ■

Among the Disbelievers

DANIEL LAZARE

Imagine it's Paris in the spring of 1789 and you have just announced that you are an inveterate foe of tyrants and kings. Obviously, your message is not going to fall on deaf ears. But now that you've made it clear what you're against, what are you for? Do you favor an aristocratic constitution in which power devolves to the provincial nobility? Would you prefer a British-style constitutional monarchy? Or do you believe in all power to the sans-culottes? How you answer will shape both your analysis of the situation and the political tactics you employ in changing it. It may also determine whether you wind up on the chopping block in the next half-decade or so.

This is the problem, more or less, confronting today's reinvigorated atheist movement. For a long time, religion had been doing quite nicely as a kind of minor entertainment. Christmas and Easter were quite unthinkable without it, not to mention Hanukkah and Passover. But then certain enthusiasts took things too far by crashing airliners into office towers in the name of Allah, launching a global crusade to rid the world of evil and declaring the jury still out on Darwinian evolution. As a consequence, religion now looks nearly as bad as royalism did in the late eighteenth century. But while united in their resolve to throw the bum out—God, that is—the anti-religious forces appear to have given little thought to what to replace Him with should He go. They may not face the guillotine as a consequence. But they could end up making even bigger fools of themselves than the theologians they criticize.

BOOKS DISCUSSED IN THIS ESSAY

THE GOD DELUSION.
By Richard Dawkins.
Houghton Mifflin. 406 pp. $27.

GOD IS NOT GREAT: How Religion Poisons Everything.
By Christopher Hitchens.
Warner Twelve. 307 pp. $24.99.

ATHEIST MANIFESTO: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.
By Michel Onfray.
Arcade. 219 pp. $28.

THE MEANING OF LIFE.
By Terry Eagleton.
Oxford. 187 pp. $19.95.

Richard Dawkins is a case in point. It is no surprise that, along with Sam Harris, author of *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*, and Daniel Dennett, author of *Breaking the Spell: Religion As a Natural Phenomenon*, he has emerged at the head of a growing intellectual movement aimed at relegating religion to the proverbial scrapheap of history (which by this point must be filled to overflowing). He's bright, obviously, a lively writer—his 1978 book *The Selfish Gene* is regarded as a pop science classic—and as an evolutionary biologist, he's particularly well equipped to defend Darwin against neofundamentalist hordes for whom he is the Antichrist. But Dawkins is something else as well: fiercely combative. Other scientists have tried to calm things down by making nice-nice noises concerning the supposedly complementary nature of the two pursuits. Einstein famously said that "science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind," while the late paleontologist Stephen J. Gould once characterized the two fields as "non-overlapping magisteria" that address different questions and have no reason to get in each other's way. But Dawkins, to his great credit, is having none of it. Although he does not quite come out and say so, he seems to have the good sense to realize that no two fields are ever truly separate but that, in a unified body of human knowledge, or episteme, all overlap. Conflict is inevitable when different fields employ different prin-

Daniel Lazare, a regular contributor to the Books & the Arts section, is currently at work on a book about the politics of Christianity, Judaism and Islam for Pantheon.

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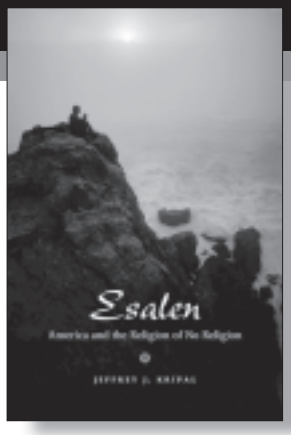

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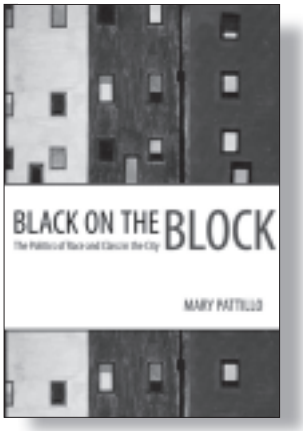

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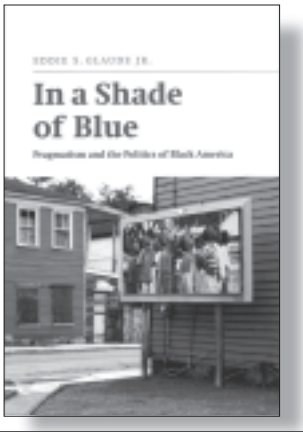

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ciples and say different things, which is why an evolutionary biologist can't simply ignore it when some blow-dried TV evangelist declares that God created the world in six days, and why he'll become positively unhinged should the same televangelist begin pressuring textbook publishers to adopt his views.

Consequently, he's got to go on the warpath—not only against the fundamentalists but against the sloppy logic and wishful thinking on which they batten. This is Dawkins's forte, and it is what makes *The God Delusion* such an entertaining read. Not one for politeness, he is the sort of fierce logic-chopper who chuckles nastily when coming across what he regards as some particularly choice bit of inanity. Discussing Arius of Alexandria, for example, infamous in certain fourth-century theological circles for maintaining that God and Jesus were not "consubstantial," i.e., not composed of the same substance or essence, you can almost hear him snicker: "What on earth could that possibly mean, you are probably asking? Substance? What 'substance'? What exactly do you mean by 'essence'? 'Very little' seems the only reasonable reply." Quoting a third-century theologian known as St. Gregory the Miracle Worker on the mystery of the Holy Trinity—"There is therefore nothing created, nothing subject to another in the Trinity: nor is there anything that has been added as though it once had not existed, but had entered afterwards: therefore the Father has never been without the Son"—he can't help sneering that "whatever miracles may have earned St. Gregory his nickname, they were not miracles of honest lucidity." Noting that the Catholic Church divides angels into nine categories, or orders—seraphim, cherubim, thrones, dominions, virtues, powers, principalities, archangels and ordinary members of the angelic rank-and-file—he lets slip that "what impresses me about Catholic mythology is partly its tasteless kitsch but mostly the airy nonchalance with which these people make up the details as they go along."

This is not entirely fair. The Catholic Church does not just make such things up but has thought long and hard about angelic orders and other matters of equal importance. But Dawkins's outrage at the persistence of medieval ideas in the modern era is warranted. In fact, it's overdue. Also warranted is the sheer pleasure he takes in recounting a double-blind experiment funded by a whopping-rich outfit known as the Templeton Foundation to test the efficacy of prayer. Headed by a Boston cardiologist, Dawkins informs us, the study involved 1,802 patients in six hospitals who had just undergone coronary bypass surgery. Researchers divided the subjects into three groups: those who were not informed that church congregations as far away as Missouri were praying for their speedy recovery, those who were informed and a control group consisting of patients for whom no prayers were said and who were unaware that an experiment was under way. Church members were provided with each patient's first name and last initial and, in the interest of standardization, were asked to pray "for a successful surgery with a quick, healthy recovery and no complications" in just those words.

The results, announced in April 2006, were a hoot. The first group of patients, those who had no idea that others were praying for them, did no better than the control group, while the second, those who knew they were the object of others' prayers, actually did worse. "Performance anxiety," the experimenters theorized. "It may have made them uncertain, wondering am I so sick they had to call in their prayer team?" one speculated. Instead of accepting the results gracefully and conceding that the theory of intercessory prayer had been disproved, an Oxford theologian named Richard Swinburne complained that the whole exercise was meaningless because what matters to God is not prayer so much as the reasons behind it. But if the experiment

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had gone the other way and the patients being prayed over had outperformed the control group, we can well imagine what the reaction would have been. People like Swinburne would have shouted from the rooftops that God's existence had been proved and that we had all better beg his forgiveness double-quick.

But it didn't, and it is now clear that praying for a quick recovery is on par with crossing one's fingers and wishing for a Mercedes. Science is predicated on the assumption that belief is unwarranted without evidence and reason to back it up. But religion is based on the opposite: that belief in the absence of evidence is a virtue and that "the more your beliefs defy the evidence, the more virtuous you are," as Dawkins puts it. "Virtuoso believers who can manage to believe something really weird, unsupported and insupportable, in the teeth of evidence and reason, are especially highly rewarded." That last line is classic Dawkins—provocative, pugnacious, even a bit over the top, but true.

As Dawkins admits, there is something distinctly nineteenth century about the new rationalism that he and others are promoting. It smacks of prairie populism and freethinkers like the wonderful Robert Ingersoll, who, in the post–Civil War period, used to crisscross the country, drawing thousands eager to hear him denounce the churches, poke fun at the Bible and sing the praises of Darwin: "Can we affect the nature and qualities of substance by prayer? Can we hasten or delay the tides by worship? Can we change winds by sacrifice? Will kneelings give us wealth?… Has man obtained any help from heaven?" These were questions that made Ingersoll one of the most popular lecturers of his day. Now, after the mushy ecumenism of the late twentieth century and the religious terrorism of the early twenty-first, a growing number of Americans plainly long for something more bracing.

But we are still in the position of the French revolutionary who has not moved beyond antiroyalism. Atheism is a purely negative ideology, which is its problem. If one does not believe in God, what should one believe in instead? Dawkins thinks he has an answer—science—but his understanding of the term is embarrassingly crude and empirical.

This comes through when he tries to figure out how "the God delusion" arose in the first place. Why did people latch onto an idea that we now know to be incorrect? Why didn't the ancient Israelites conduct their own double-blind experiment to determine whether sacrificing all those bulls, rams and occasionally children to Yahweh was really worth the trouble? Dawkins gropes for an explanation at one point in his book. He speculates that religious visions may be a form of temporal lobe epilepsy (which implies that there must have been quite an epidemic in Palestine when people like Elijah, Hosea and Jeremiah were raising a ruckus) but then lets the idea drop. He suggests that religion caught on because it confers certain evolutionary advantages but concedes that this is exceedingly hard to prove. He speculates that faith may be the result of a self-replicating "meme," the cultural equivalent of a gene. But after a murky discussion of "memeplexes" and genetic cartels, the reader is left with the uncomfortable feeling that Dawkins is lost in a tautological fog in which religion is self-replicating because it satisfies certain human needs and is therefore… self-replicating. Finally, he suggests that religion survives because it is comforting—this, some 200 pages after conceding that religion is as likely to exacerbate stress as to alleviate it. (The last thing Old Testament prophets wanted to do was soothe troubled souls.)

Dawkins's sense of history is so minimal that it approaches the vanishing point. He is a classic example of the kind of shallow rationalist who thinks that all you have to know about his-

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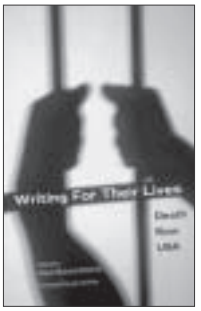

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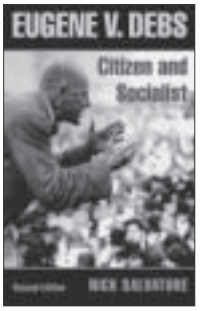

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tory is that everything was cloudy and dark until the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, at which point the sun began poking through. To quote Alexander Pope: "Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night:/God said, Let Newton be! and all was light." Religion took hold at a certain point because people were stupid and benighted, but now that this is no longer the case, it should not hang around a moment longer. Yet it never occurs to Dawkins that monotheism is a theory like any other and that certain Jewish scribes and priests adopted it in the sixth century BC because it seemed to confer certain advantages. These were not survival advantages, since the Jews went on to rack up an unparalleled record of military defeats. Rather, they were intellectual advantages in that the theory of a single all-powerful, all-knowing deity seemed to explain the world better than what had come before.

Since Dawkins sees all religion as merely dumb, he can't imagine how this might be. Hence he can't see how the idea of an all-powerful, all-knowing creator might cause worshipers to see the world as a single integrated whole and then launch them on a long intellectual journey to figure out how the various parts fit together. Roughly 2,500 years separate the Book of Isaiah, in which Yahweh first declares, "I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no god [44:6]," and Einstein's quest for a unified field theory explaining everything from subatomic structure to the Big Bang. Everything else has changed, but the universalism behind such an endeavor has remained remarkably constant. Dawkins blames religion for stifling human curiosity. But were he a bit more curious about the phenomenon he is supposedly investigating, he would realize that it has done as much over the long haul to stimulate it. For a world-famous intellectual, he is oddly provincial.

Christopher Hitchens's new book, *God Is Not Great*, is another example of atheism as an empty vessel, one he manages to fill with an intellectual justification for George W. Bush's "war on terror." Hitchens, of course, is the former left-wing journalist who astounded friends, colleagues and readers alike by coming out in support of the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Since then, with everyone from Richard Perle to Peter Beinart busily backpedaling as the dimensions of the disaster have grown more and more glaring, Hitchens has dug in his heels. Like John McCain strolling through the Baghdad markets, he is more defiant of reality than ever, more insistent, as he put it in a March 26 article in the *Australian*, that the occupation has made the world a better and safer place. In *God Is Not Great*, he has something unpleasant to say about nearly every believer under the sun—except one. He trots out John Ashcroft's infamous remark that America has "no king but Jesus" and reminds us that Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson both welcomed 9/11 as payback for America's tolerance of homosexuality and abortion. He informs us that Hamas has talked about imposing the old Al-Jeziya tax on Christians and Jews in the West Bank, while in Gaza in April 2005 Muslim militants shot and killed a young woman named Yusra al-Azami merely because she was sitting unchaperoned in a car with her fiancé. For those inclined to think of the late Saddam Hussein as a Third World dictator in the secular-nationalist mold, Hitchens points out that Saddam found religion after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, inscribing the words "Allahuh Akhbar" (God is great) on the Iraqi flag, building a huge mosque as a showcase for his new piety and producing a handwritten version of the Koran allegedly with his own blood.

Yet one person is conspicuously absent from Hitchens's list of religious evil-doers: George W. Bush. Yes, the man who said Jesus is his favorite philosopher "because he changed my heart" and, as governor of Texas, proclaimed June 10 as "Jesus Day," goes unmentioned. How can this be? The explanation has to do with Hitchens's subtitle. If "religion poisons everything," then it must be responsible for most of the evil in the world, since belief of this sort is currently so widespread and pervasive. If a political leader is religious, he or she must be bad, and if he or she is bad, he or she must be religious. This is why Saddam gets slammed for his cynical exploitation of Islam and why Bush, author of the Global War on Terror and the war on Iraq, both of which Hitchens supports, gets a free pass. If he is to be believed, our faith-based President is defending rationalism against religious intolerance. Despite Hitchens's anti-Stalinist credentials, arguments like these are so unscrupulous as to call to mind the Comintern of the late '30s and early '40s. Somewhere, Andrei Vyshinsky is smiling.

Hitchens's historical sense in *God Is Not Great* is perhaps even more stunted than that of Dawkins. Here he is, for example, attacking the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah, which celebrates the Maccabean revolt in 168 BC against the Seleucid effort to de-Judaize the Jerusalem temple and consecrate it to Zeus:

> When the father of Judah Maccabeus saw a Jew about to make a Hellenic offering

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on the old altar, he lost no time in murdering him. Over the next few years of the Maccabean "revolt," many more assimilated Jews were slain, or forcibly circumcised, or both, and the women who had flirted with the new Hellenic dispensation suffered even worse. Since the Romans eventually preferred the violent and dogmatic Maccabees to the less militarized and fanatical Jews who had shone in their togas in the Mediterranean light, the scene was set for the uneasy collusion between the old-garb ultra-Orthodox Sanhedrin and the imperial governorate. This lugubrious relationship was eventually to lead to Christianity (yet another Jewish heresy) and thus ineluctably to the birth of Islam. We could have been spared the whole thing.

If only the Maccabees had stood by as Antiochus IV Epiphanes looted the temple treasury, the world could have skipped 2,000 years or so of religious fanaticism and proceeded directly to the founding of the Council for Secular Humanism. Needless to say, there is no sense here of historical progress as necessarily convoluted and complex, with lots of back eddies, side currents and extended periods of stagnation. But just as it takes a child a long time to mature, it takes a long time for society as well.

It would be nice to believe that anachronistic thinking like this halted at Calais, but Michel Onfray's *Traité de athéologie*, which has been given the hotter title of *Atheist Manifesto* for the American market, is not reassuring. Onfray is more philosophically sophisticated than Dawkins and Hitchens, and he is entirely commendable in his determination to hold Judaism, Christianity and Islam to the same rigorous standard. Whereas Sam Harris singles out Islam as "a religion of conquest," for instance, Onfray points out that it was the Israelites who invented holy war, that the Israelite god Yahweh "sanctioned crimes, murders, assassination…kill[ing] animals like men and men like animals," and that the Vatican has distinguished itself more recently as "a fellow traveler with every brand of twentieth-century fascism—Mussolini, Pétain, Franco, Hitler, Pinochet, the Greek colonels, South American dictators, etc." Islam's division of the world into a land of Islam and a land of infidels is "not too distant from Hitler's," Onfray adds. But Harris should know better than to call it "unique."

This may seem fairly obvious. But with everyone from atheists to neocons jumping on board the anti-Islamic crusade, it bears repeating. Still, Onfray goes astray in the left-Nietzschean twist that he gives to his antireligious critique. Nietzsche's influence is evident throughout *Atheist Manifesto*—in its high-wattage prose style, in its tendency toward aphorism, but mostly in its treatment of things like Judaism and Christianity as intellectual categories removed from their historical contexts. Onfray, to cite just one example, is extremely hard on St. Paul, whom he describes as a hysteric "driven by a host of psychological problems," a loser who "converted his self-loathing into hatred of the world" and someone whose "impotence and resentment took the form of revenge: the revenge of the weakling." None of this is surprising, given Paul's views on such subjects as celibacy (strongly in favor), marriage (only for those unable to forgo sex), slavery (accepting) and women (condescending, to say the least). But anyone who reads Paul in the context of the entire Bible—which Onfray says elsewhere is the only way the Bible can be properly understood—will likely come away with a different impression. His hysteria, such as it is, doesn't begin to compare with that of Hosea, Jeremiah and other Hebrew prophets, whose rages were truly volcanic. His political quietism is more explicable if one bears in mind that he believed that an impending apocalypse would

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soon put an end to all forms of injustice. His views on gender are more benign than is commonly realized, which may be why even pagans reported that women were among the first to convert.

Indeed, Paul was something new as far as the biblical tradition was concerned, a thinker, polemicist and organizer who was sober, practical and all but tireless. This is undoubtedly why Engels was so notably friendly toward him in one of his last essays. Not only did he describe Pauline Christianity as the socialism of its day but, referring to an epistle in which Paul reminds parishioners of the need to provide the new movement with financial support (which he describes as the "grace of giving"), he even commiserated with him across the centuries over the difficulty of squeezing party dues out of local members. ("So it was like that with you too!") Context for Engels was all. It was obvious from his perspective that someone like Paul could not be held exclusively to a modern standard but had to be judged on the basis of his historical role. So what has happened in the century or so since Engels wrote that essay that has caused otherwise admirable leftists like Onfray to lose their historical bearings? Could the baleful influence of Nietzsche, the favorite philosopher of overwrought 16-year-olds, have something to do with it?

Terry Eagleton shows a firmer grasp of the issues in *The Meaning of Life*—far firmer, in fact, than he did in the verbal hurricane that he unleashed on Dawkins in *The London Review of Books* last October. That article, which earned Eagleton a warm note of congratulations from Peter Steinfels in his "Beliefs" column in the *New York Times*—an indication of just how bad it actually was—was filled with ex cathedra comments and unsupported assertions that Eagleton, a left-wing Catholic back in the 1960s, somehow thought he could intimidate his readers into accepting. Thus: Dawkins "does not see that Christianity, like most religious faiths, values human life deeply, which is why the martyr differs from the suicide." Or: "Because the universe is God's, it shares in his life, which is the life of freedom. This is why it works all by itself, and why science and Richard Dawkins are therefore both possible." Dawkins is a boor, in other words, because he is unable to grasp such ineffable truths. Yet both statements were nothing more than silly. Judaism concerns itself not with the life of the individual but the life of the nation, while Christianity saw the life we know as merely a prelude to the real life that will occur after the Resurrection. If the universe worked all by itself, similarly, God would have no need to intervene in it miraculously from time to time, as He does in both the Old Testament and the New.

With *The Meaning of Life*, however, Eagleton, the author of such works as *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* and *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, goes back to channeling his inner materialist. When he mentions God, it is in the sense of an abstract principle that he identifies by the Greek term *agape*, or love. Needless to say, this is not love in the erotic sense of the word but as a cosmic force that is an expression of the deity's free choice in creating a material universe in which human beings can exist. Since Eagleton is coy as to whether he is speaking literally or figuratively, most readers will assume the latter. As a rhetorical device, it therefore allows him to make the point that the alternative to divine creation is not an empty and meaningless universe, as some moderns would have it. Rather, we can still see the universe as an intelligible whole, one whose "underlying laws," he writes, "reveal a beauty, symmetry, and economy which are capable of moving scientists to tears" (a rare point of agreement with Dawkins). If believers, according to Bishop Berkeley, believe that God invested the universe with meaning through the act of creating it, then nonbelievers can believe that people can invest life with meaning through a similar act of creating a mode of living that allows people to realize their full potential.

This supposes that meaning is not something that one discovers "out there," by, say, sitting on a lonely mountaintop and contemplating the heavens. Rather, it supposes that one discovers it "in here," that is, in society and through it. In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins notes that people might fill the gap left by religious belief in any number of ways but adds that "my way includes a good dose of science, the honest and systematic endeavor to find out the truth about the real world." The words "my way" are a giveaway, since they suggest that meaning is something we arrive at individually. Eagleton, by contrast, contends that individual meaning is a solipsism, because any statement about oneself—such as "I am handsomer than Adonis" or "I am the greatest composer since Beethoven"—is meaningful only to the degree it is recognized by others. Hence, "my life is meaningful" is itself meaningful only to the degree that other people view it as such and see their own lives the same way. Hence, meaning can be achieved only via a collective act of self-creation in which humanity creates new conditions for itself so that humanity as a whole can flourish. As a corollary, Eagleton adds that "since there can be no true reciprocity except among equals, oppression and inequality are in the long run self-thwarting as well." Freedom and equality are necessary for humanity to create a meaningful existence for itself.

In short, humanity creates meaning for itself by liberating itself so that it can fulfill itself. This is also a solipsism, but one as big as all existence. Odd, isn't it, that atheists can be right about God but wrong about religion and much else about the modern condition, while a believer can be wrong about God but at least on the right track concerning the current spiritual malaise? ■

The Wharton School

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EDITH WHARTON. By Hermione Lee. Knopf. 869 pp. $35.

In 1929 Janet Flanner (*aka* Genêt), fledgling Paris correspondent for the fledgling *New Yorker*, wrote under her own byline for the first time. Her profile of Edith Wharton, she knew, had caught both Mrs. Wharton's personality and the ambivalence it inspired in the brasher, far more experimental writers of the 1920s. A chilly bluestocking and a perpetual outsider, whether in the city of her birth, New York, or her adopted homeland, France, Wharton was the mother of them all, beloved and hated. Her long career included a Pulitzer Prize for *The Age of Innocence* (1921), a gold medal from the National Institute of Arts and Letters (she was the first woman to receive it) and a string of bestsellers because, as Flanner tartly observed, in lambasting society's sins, "Mrs. Wharton gave the great public what it wanted." Wharton was, in other words, a middle-brow satirist who, wearing pearls and décolletage in her stock publicity

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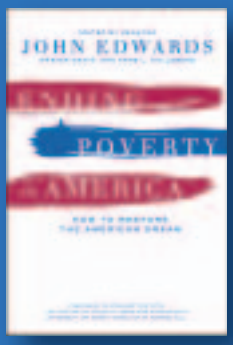

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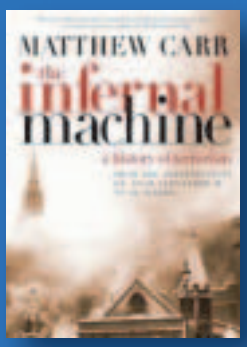

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photograph, "dressed for her public as for a ball."

On the cover of Hermione Lee's exhaustive new biography, the fortysomething Wharton, draped in furs, stands in front of a large shadowy picture and glances wistfully to her left, reddish hair decorously swept up into a large, fashionable hat. Decidedly affluent, Wharton also seems youthfully vulnerable and, in a sense, trapped by her flush costume. For Lee, the Goldsmiths' Professor of English Literature at Oxford University and author of a superb biography of Virginia Woolf, intends to make the writer human, real and engaging.

Determined not to present Wharton as the pale, predestined or passionless victim of her well-heeled class and kind, Lee admiringly writes at the outset of her book that "with prolonged, hard-working, deliberate ambition, she pushed out and away from her family's mental habits, social rules and ways of life…to construct her own personal and professional revolution." That is, almost eighty years after Flanner's profile appeared (which Lee in passing calls "malicious"), Mrs. Wharton comes before the public yet again, this time as a tough and first-rate writer of "compassionate realism" and as, once again, a perpetual expatriate, dignified, aloof in public and preternaturally energetic, a devoted friend and complicated, contradictory woman.

Born in 1862, the youngest child and only daughter of George Frederic and Lucretia Stevens Rhinelander Jones, Edith Jones was a solitary child whose mother disparaged her first attempt at fiction, as Wharton famously recounts in her 1934 memoir, *A Backward Glance*. She began her story with a character exclaiming, "If only I had known you were going to call I should have tidied up the drawing-room" and then nervously handed her work to her mother, who read it and dryly remarked, "Drawing-rooms are always tidy." Yet it may have been her mother, whom she never forgave, who arranged to have a volume of her verses privately printed in 1878. (In later life, Wharton said her father, whom she liked better, had arranged the printing.) In any case, two years later, when Wharton was 18, one of her brothers helped get the poems to *The Atlantic Monthly*, which published several. Though suffocated by the ornamental life of the rich, Wharton was off to a well-connected literary start.

Twenty years old when her father died, she soon met erudite, aloof and aspiring young international lawyer Walter Van Rensselaer Berry, a lifelong friend, literary mentor and confirmed bachelor, with whom she may or may not have fallen in love and near whom she is buried in the Cimetière des Gonards at Versailles. In 1885, though, she married Edward (Teddy) Wharton, an amiable Harvard graduate twelve years older than she with no career and absolutely no interest in literature. The marriage was a disaster. Prone to mental illness, all the more so after his wife became a famous author and had an extra-

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Edith Wharton, circa 1884

marital affair, Teddy fell apart, mismanaged funds and was hospitalized; in 1913, after twenty-eight unhappy years together, Wharton divorced him.

Edith Wharton had "constructed a life," as Lee reminds us, during her difficult and neurasthenic early married life. Her first book, *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), written with architect Ogden Codman, was, as Lee puts it, part of a "complex cultural argument about America at the turn of the century" that took her parents' generation to task for its smugness, parochialism and genteel bric-a-brac. Based on Wharton's extensive research in America and Europe, the argument revealed an "ethics of style" (the term is Lee's) that extended to her gardens, her books and her comportment: uncluttered, well balanced, not a Victorian frippery in sight. As a consequence Lee describes all Wharton's various homes—even the English estate Coopersale, which she did not buy—and her breathtaking gardens, chiefly at the Pavillon Colombe in Saint-Brice-Sous-Forêt and the Château Sainte-Claire in Hyères on the French Riviera, in painstaking and loving detail.

Wharton wrote travel articles, later collected, and stories for *Scribner's* and *The Century* magazines, and as early as 1899 her first volume of stories was selling well, tamping down bouts of insecurity and illness. In the next five years she steamed ahead, publishing two novellas, two more story collections, a two-volume novel, a translation and two books on Italy: There's no Melvillean trajectory of failure here. She handled editors, advertising, contracts and illustrations with professional and high-hatted aplomb. *The House of Mirth* (1905) earned $20,000 off the bat and was a *succès d'estime*. *Ethan Frome* (1911), *The Reef* (1912) and *The Custom of the Country* (1913)—arguably her best book—all tumbled out, one after the other, followed by the tragic *Summer* (1917). As a famous author and wealthy woman with an ample inheritance who earned $50,000 within two years of the publication of *The Age of Innocence* (1920) and netted about $6,000 per story in the early 1920s, Wharton would fret over the relation between art and commerce—"could you be very good, and very popular," Lee rhetorically asks. It was a concern in much of Wharton's work, in early stories like "The Descent of Man" (1904) and late novels such as *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929) and *The Gods Arrive* (1932).

This is also a theme in much of the praise she consistently and at times condescendingly received during her lifetime. By the later '20s (*vide* Flanner) Wharton's reputation was tarnished by writers who considered her as passé as a tufted sofa parked under a gas chandelier. Edmund Wilson rushed to her posthumous rescue, republishing his 1938 essay "Justice to Edith Wharton," written the year of her death, in *The Wound and the Bow* (1941). Wharton was a social prophet as pessimistic as Hardy or Maupassant, he said, a pioneer as well as a poet of interior decoration—but, of course, inevitably a has-been: In women "something like genius may be stimulated by some exceptional emotional strain, but will disappear when the stimulus has passed."

Wharton's reputation suffered another critical blow in 1947, when her former friend Percy Lubbock published his *Portrait of Edith Wharton*, making, as Lee mischievously remarks, the aloof and aristocratic writer "sound like the character played by Margaret Dumont in the Marx Brothers films." Yet for all these slings and arrows, Wharton's reputation does not need rehabilitation today. After the 1968

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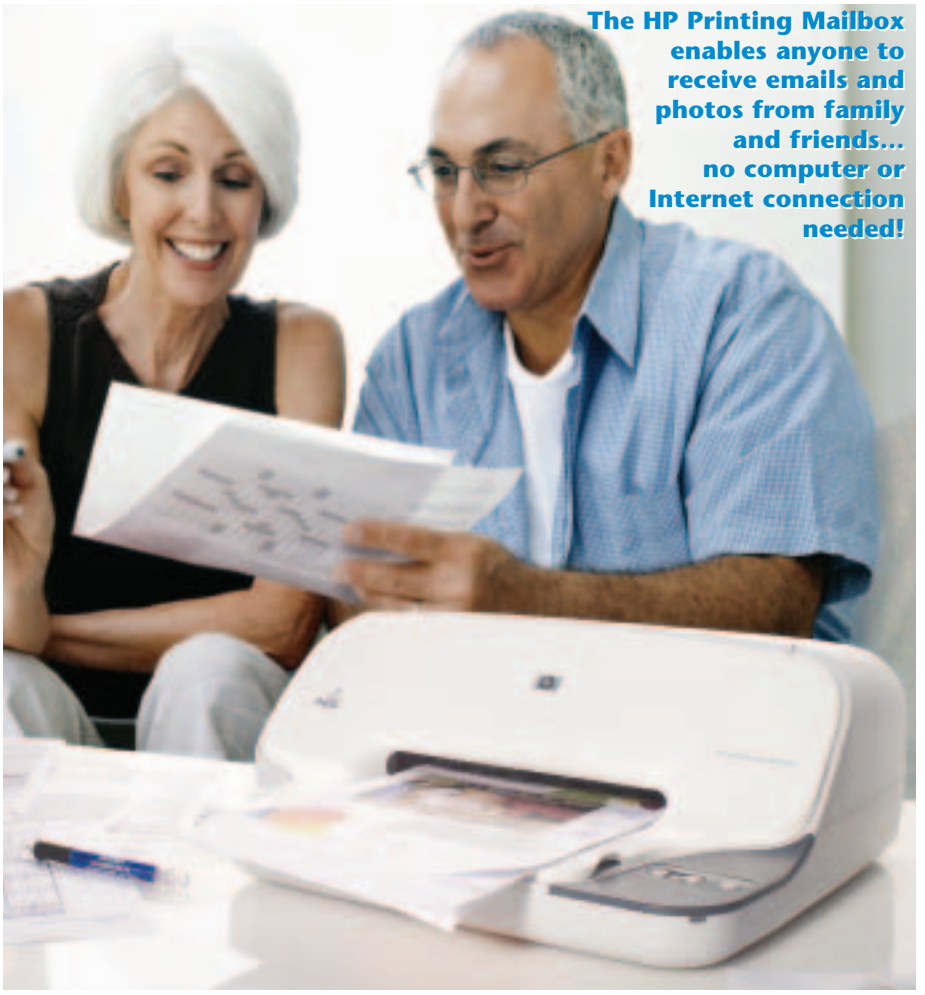
By June Fleming



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lifting of the embargo on voluminous papers left to Yale University's Beinecke Library, Yale professor R.W.B. Lewis was selected to write Wharton's biography, and his graceful Pulitzer Prize–winning book, published in 1975, revealed that, among other things, Margaret Dumont was really Bette Davis: For almost two years, circa 1908–10, the 46-year-old Wharton had a passionate affair with the charming bisexual roué Morton Fullerton, a handsome Harvard-trained journalist raised in Waltham, Massachusetts, and the model for Henry James's Merton Densher in *The Wings of the Dove*. In addition, in the appendix to his book Lewis published Wharton's erotic love poem "Terminus," as well as a prose fragment, "Beatrice Palmato," about an incestuous relationship between a father and daughter. Mrs. Wharton was not the cold fish she'd been taken for.

Nor was she a lesser Henry James. As Lee makes amply clear, from the time she began publishing in the 1890s, Wharton was compared to James (he was not compared to her) and resented being considered his disciple, especially since she could not bear to read his late work. As Lee points out, Wharton was more likely to write "against him than to write under him," parodying his titles, rewriting his *Aspern Papers* as the story "The Touchstone" or *Portrait of a Lady* as *The House of Mirth*. Yet their friendship was lasting and deep, if sometimes fraught with asperity. James called The Mount, the mansion she built in Lenox in 1902, a "delicate French château mirrored in a Massachusetts pond" and described the cavalcade of travel arrangements—car, chauffeur, hats, veils, cushions, robes and servants dispatched ahead to ready the hotel rooms—as the "incoherent restlessness of wealth" and "a luxury of bloated alternatives." But it was James who urged Wharton, after the publication of her first novel, an Italian costume drama called *The Valley of Decision* (1902), to "Do New York" and become the American Balzac. "It was as if, from the first," Lee wryly notes, "he was encouraging her to do what he could not."

These days, though, Wharton has largely been pried loose from James, her well-crafted novels and stories ranked independently and high, their narratives tight and fresh. They bear rereading: Her reach is farther, deeper, than one may have supposed, her dramatic sense tighter, her insight into the foibles and follies of character more unsparing *and* more merciful. And her books have not been forgotten: Lily Bart and Ethan Frome are American icons, and novels such as *The House of Mirth*, *Summer* and *The Age of Innocence* are continually dramatized, filmed and set to music. Nor is there any dearth of information being uncovered about Wharton's life. In 1977 Cynthia Griffin Wolff published an adroit psychological study of Wharton (*A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton*) and Richard Howard's brilliant poem "The Lesson of the Master" was read on National Public Radio with Nancy Marchand as Wharton. In 1994 Shari Benstock's well-researched feminist biography as well as Eleanor Dwight's illustrated one both appeared. Marion Mainwaring, formerly R.W.B. Lewis's assistant, recently wrote a book about Morton Fullerton in which she itemizes Lewis's mistakes and appropriations, and Lewis himself, along with his wife, edited a large selection of Wharton letters, which included many to Fullerton. Wharton was also the subject of a C-SPAN program on American writers, and the home she built in Lenox is being restored to its former splendor, complete with tours and celebratory programs.

Edith Wharton transformed her obsessions into stories of loss, regret, entrapment and the woman who pays and pays.

What, then, can a new biographer hope to accomplish—in almost 900 pages—beyond compiling and elaborating on what has already been amassed? (Such a voluminous compilation, responsibly done, is no small task.) The signal strength of Lee's book lies in its social history and literary criticism, its insights into Wharton's reading of Proust (whose strength, observed Wharton, "is the strength of tradition") and its fine discussions of *The House of Mirth*, *Ethan Frome* ("a story of silence and speechlessness") and *The Age of Innocence* ("all about being watched"). She also brushes the dust of Wharton's fine, grim story "Bunner Sisters" and draws attention to the late, elegiac novel *The Children* (1928). Delicately relating each of these to Wharton's life—although underscoring that Wharton did not write directly about her own experiences—Lee astutely demonstrates how Wharton transformed her obsessions into stories of loss, regret, entrapment and the woman who pays and pays.

Above all, as Lee demonstrates, Wharton's subject was social change: the parvenu of the Gilded Age upsetting the applecart of old money into which Wharton was born; the horrors of conspicuous consumption (Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* was a Wharton favorite) in a culture that stifles creativity; the unwritten codes of well-bred behavior and the feckless men who hew to them, usually at the expense of women; and the tension between brash American vulgarities (slang, skyscrapers, standardization) and the gratifying polyphony of a well-made sentence.

Not a storyteller in the manner of such countrywomen as Victoria Glendinning and Claire Tomalin, Lee builds Wharton's portrait by means of a series of biographical essays, or chapters, each organized around related topics: childhood memories and Wharton's retrospective elision of them; her travels in Italy; her English coterie of friends; the history of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, where Wharton lived from 1907 to 1920; her indefatigable war work setting up a network of schools, orphanages and hostels for Belgian refugees in France, for which she was named in France a chevalier of the Legion of Honor and sent to Morocco to report on the colonial Resident-General Louis-Hubert Lyautey, whom she knew and whose brand of paternalistic imperialism she admired. Wharton's antimodernism is the subject of a chapter called "Jazz," and a marvelous chapter, "A Private Library," enumerates Wharton's books and marginal annotations—an autobiography in themselves, as Lee nicely observes. This is academic criticism at its best, the sort painfully out of fashion in the academy. And Lee does not deal in labored prose. She calls Ogden Codman's complaints "bitchy"; she dubs the translator Charles Du Bos a "fusspot" and she describes the mother of Wharton's friend Philomène de Lévis-Mirepoix as "a hoot." One can feel Mrs. Wharton shudder.

But the pitfall of Lee's biographical method is a degree of extraneous, if often entertaining, detail (the family tree of Wharton's friend Lady Wemyss, the people she did not meet at Paul Éluard's home, which she did not visit, or the fact that one could not hang out one's wash in the Faubourg in the 1950s). Still more problematic is her assumption that the reader is a Wharton aficionado already apprised of the importance of various characters (Morton Fullerton, say) before their relevance is fully established. And her method requires a certain repetition of

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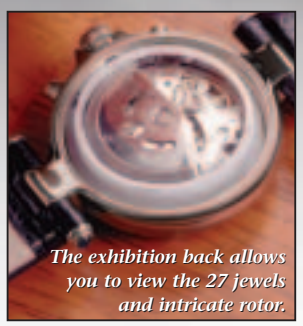

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characters, incidents, "impeccable pedigrees" and subject matter—a somewhat inevitable drawback when some of the same anecdotes kaleidoscopically reappear in various chapters, albeit from a slightly different point of view.

Ultimately, though, there is the matter of Wharton's character, which Lee treats evenhandedly. Addressing, for instance, the matter of Wharton's insufferable anti-Semitism in the last third of her book, Lee twice recounts Wharton's deathbed pronouncement that she "hated the Jews" and comments unpersuasively that Wharton's attitudes "were commonplace among upper-class Anglo-Americans, and the French, in pre-Holocaust times." Respectful of Wharton's prejudices but far more candid than her "gallantly protective male biographers," Lee calls Lewis's omission of rancid anti-Semitism from the selected *Letters* a "polite misrepresentation" and then adds, with far more principle than earlier, that one must take Wharton's views seriously. As a result, Lee's Wharton is fastidious, high-handed, imperious in her treatment of servants and, occasionally, her friends; she is snobbish, arrogant, lonely and driven, and her amazing work during the war had "a touch of Lady Bountiful" about it. Her politics leaned to the right; she disliked socialists and lesbians; she was something of a warmonger; and according to writer Sybille Bedford (whom Lee calls unfair), she did not like women, or at least young women, writers. Lee gives us all of it, as if pre-empting any criticism of Wharton by anticipating it.

Yet Wharton remains a supremely talented, serious and ethical writer who herself warned us that "the only way to judge an artist is by his works." It's an admonishment Lee admirably heeds.

In the conventional biographical trope that ends her book, Lee searches in the rain for Wharton's grave, which she cleans up a bit, pulling weeds and planting on it a single artificial white flower. One assumes the artificial flower is not a metaphor for her biographical achievement; but even if it is, one finishes her book satisfied, knowing the grave is well tended. ■

The New Face of Warfare

FATIN ABBAS

In his book *Innocents Lost*, Jimmie Briggs recounts picking up the *New York Times* one morning. Opening the newspaper, he was confronted by a disturbing image—a large photograph of a young Liberian kneeling and howling on a city street, his face contorted with rage as he pointed a gun at the photographer who had captured his image. This was no child's play: The gun was real—an automatic rifle almost as big as the boy himself. As Briggs remembers, however, "More chilling than the weapon he held was what he wore on his back: a pink teddy-bear backpack, a telling symbol of his lost youth." The boy, no more than 11 or 12, was a child soldier, one of the thousands who served during the Liberian civil wars of 1989–2003 and one of the hundreds of thousands of children who have served or are serving in armed conflicts around the globe. Possibly the world's most unrecognized form of child abuse, child soldiering has become a defining feature of modern warfare. This horrifying new face of armed conflict is the subject of three important recent books—Briggs's *Innocents Lost*, P.W. Singer's *Children at War* and Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*.

BOOKS DISCUSSED IN THIS ESSAY

A LONG WAY GONE: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier.
By Ishmael Beah.
Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 229 pp. $22.

CHILDREN AT WAR.
By P.W. Singer.
California. 264 pp. Paper $16.95.

INNOCENTS LOST: When Child Soldiers Go to War.
By Jimmie Briggs.
Basic. 188 pp. $24.95.

Singer's study leaves little doubt about just how prevalent the phenomenon has become. The statistics he presents speak for themselves. In more than three-fourths of armed conflicts around the world today there are significant numbers of child combatants. At any one time, there are more than 300,000 child soldiers serving with nonstate armed groups. In addition, more than fifty states actively recruit hundreds of thousands of soldiers under 18, in contravention of international law. It is in Africa, considered to be the epicenter of the child soldier phenomenon, that child soldiering is most widespread. Where there is conflict on the continent, one can be sure that children will be found right in the middle of it. In the 1991–2001 civil war between Sierra Leone's government and the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF), as many as 80 percent of all fighters were between the ages of 7 and 14. In the two waves of civil war that engulfed Liberia between 1989 and 2003, up to 70 percent of government and rebel combatants were children. In the recent war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), ignited in 1996 by Laurent Kabila's revolt against Mobutu's regime, roughly half the fighters (between 30,000 and 50,000) were child soldiers. Perhaps the group most notorious for its exploitation of child soldiers is the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda, which has been waging a bloody war against the government for almost eighteen years. Led by Joseph Kony, a man who claims to be possessed by the Holy Spirit and to be fighting to restore respect for the Ten Commandments (this while breaking every one), the LRA's forces are composed almost entirely of children. The group, Singer informs us, "also holds the ignoble record of having the world's youngest reported armed combatant, aged five."

But while child soldiering is most widespread in Africa, the phenomenon is by no means confined to that continent. In Colombia, a country that has been in the grip of violence for the past sixty years—a cocaine-fueled conflict between the government, right-wing paramilitaries and various left-wing rebel groups, chief among them the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)—between 6,000 and 14,000 children serve either with guerrillas or with the government's paramilitary forces. Forty percent of slain guerrillas in the country are under 18. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam in Sri Lanka—a group that has been fighting for independence for the country's Tamil population for more than twenty-five years—is infamous for its "Baby Brigade," a wing of the movement that recruits, trains and arms children as young as 11. In Afghanistan, it is estimated that 30 percent of children have participated in military activity at some point in their lives. In fact, the first American casualty of George Bush's "war on terror," Special Forces Sgt. Nathan Chap-

Fatin Abbas, a doctoral candidate in comparative literature at Harvard University, writes frequently on African affairs.

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man, was shot dead by a 14-year-old Afghan boy fighting with the Taliban.

While Singer contends that the phenomenon of child soldiering is a recent historical development, Briggs asserts that children have always been involved in war. What both authors agree on, however, is that never before in the history of warfare have children been exploited on such a vast scale. As Singer maintains, at bottom the phenomenon is a telling symptom of troubling economic, political and environmental trends that have been developing over the past few decades. The growing level of global poverty is one of the most significant factors not only in the spread of conflict but also in the spread of child soldiering. The combined effects of globalization, dwindling natural resources, lack of educational and economic prospects and the corruption of a large number of developing-world regimes have today left 3 billion people, roughly half the world's population, living on $2 a day or less. The overwhelming majority of child soldiers are drawn from this poor, uneducated, disenfranchised and marginalized segment of society. Two out of three child soldiers take some sort of initiative in their own recruitment, contrary to the belief that most child soldiers are abducted. In poverty-stricken war-torn regions characterized by insecurity and lack of education and economic opportunity, becoming a child soldier is often the only way to guarantee some level of protection and livelihood. As one Congolese child soldier explained his choice, "I heard that the rebels at least were eating. So, I joined them."

As *Children at War* demonstrates, the growing poverty, political instability and environmental deterioration that have plagued many developing countries over the past several decades have also coincided with the proliferation and technological advancement of arms. Most of the deadliest wars today are waged with "small arms" or "light weapons," such as rifles, grenades, machine guns and mortars. It is these small arms that have resulted in almost 90 percent of all casualties in recent wars. While historically children were limited in their ability to use weapons because of the sheer strength and skill required to wield them, since World War II technological advances in small arms have made weapons much lighter and simpler to use, allowing, as Singer writes, "the transformation of children into fighters just as lethal as any adult."

Ironically, the proliferation of these deadly small arms is largely the result of

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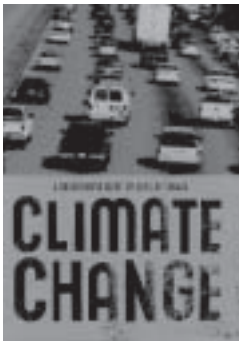

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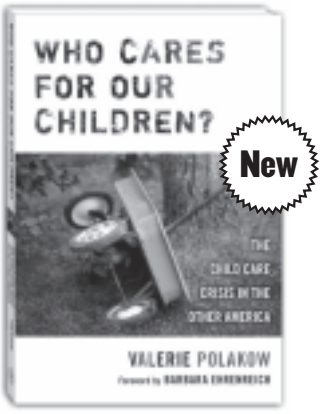

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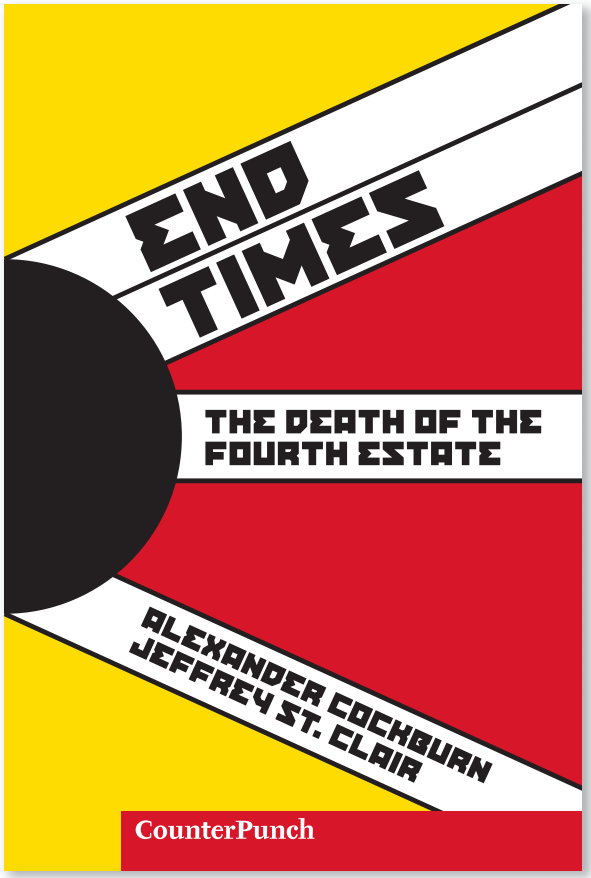

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the cold war's "peace dividend." After 1989 millions of weapons were declared "surplus" and instead of being destroyed were dumped onto the world market at a fraction of their original cost. Most of these weapons ended up in the hands of illicit organizations, and, as Singer asserts, "were added to the masses of weapons that had already been given to superpower proxies during the Cold War." Rather than resulting in a peaceful "new world order," therefore, the end of US-Soviet confrontation resulted in a sharp increase in the number of internal conflicts. The number of civil wars has doubled since 1989. As Mark Duffield, of the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Lancaster, in Britain, has remarked, the collapse of the Soviet Union brought "peace in the West, war for the rest."

Singer also convincingly advances the thesis that the systematic deployment of child soldiers by armed groups around the world reflects the rise of a new type of conflict. He avers that while many armed groups started out "with some ideological or popular goals, often related to the Cold War, that has fallen by the wayside as they struggle to survive." In certain parts of the world, warmaking is increasingly becoming an end rather than a means to an ideological or political goal, primarily because it can serve as "an alternative system of profit and power." In Angola, Sierra Leone and the DRC, for example, winning the war was a secondary goal for many of the groups involved; the primary goal was to capitalize on the chaos. Given the profit-motivated nature of a growing number of wars, therefore, armed group leaders often have no qualms about exploiting child soldiers. Children are cheap and effective, and allow groups with no grassroots support and no clear ideological or popular goals to generate force quickly and brutally.

What's more, armed groups are increasingly targeting children not only because they are cheap and effective but also because their limited psychological development means that they can be manipulated more easily than adults. Upon recruitment or forced abduction into an armed group, children are usually subjected to a brutal regimen of discipline, which may include beatings and abuse under the threat of death. The most important element of the regimen, as Singer points out, is often the ritualized killing of others—either captured victims or other children—aimed at crushing the children's opposition to the group's authority, shattering any inhibitions they may have about killing and beginning the process of desensitizing them to violence and the suffering of others. Given that upon recruitment or abduction, many of these children are so young that they have not yet developed a clear sense of right and wrong, it is only a matter of time before they are transformed into killing machines. In fact, in many conflicts today, child soldiers are feared more than adult ones, precisely because of the horrifying cruelty of which they are capable. Describing what happened to a number of West African soldiers in Liberia, one military expert quoted in Singer's book warns of the ferocity of child soldiers: "They will capture you, strip you naked, run you through the streets, cut off your testicles and fry them in a pan in front of you, fillet you from head to toe and then cut off your head to put on a stake."

While Singer's book provides an admirable overview of child soldiering, Briggs's and Beah's books present the human faces and stories of the soldiers themselves. Briggs spent six years traveling around the world and speaking to child soldiers and their families in Africa, South America and Asia, collecting their stories in *Innocents Lost*.

In Colombia, Briggs speaks to Gueso, a 16-year-old fighting with one of the government's paramilitary militias in Medellín,

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northwest of the country. By the age of 8, Gueso had already learned how to use his first weapon, a .38 pistol. Within hardly a year, he had killed his first victim: "I stabbed a guy in the neck," he boasts cheerfully to Briggs. Wired on cocaine and alcohol during the interview, he keeps saying to Briggs, "Sometimes I feel like killing." Like most of the children who join rebel or paramilitary forces in Colombia, Gueso became involved with the paramilitaries largely as a result of poverty, lack of education and unemployment. "I'm not afraid to die, but I'm afraid to die so young," he tells Briggs. "You can't think about the future here, because the future is a coffin." The tragedy is that for children like Gueso, the future is a coffin whether or not they become child soldiers.

Briggs's book also highlights the plight of an often overlooked group of child soldiers—girls. About 30 percent of armed groups who exploit child soldiers also use girls, and their situation is often worse than that of boy soldiers because they are routinely subjected to rape and sexual abuse by their fellow soldiers and also by their enemies. Not surprisingly, former girl soldiers are more than twice as likely to commit suicide as their male counterparts. In Sri Lanka, Briggs meets Sebastiana Figerardo, a widow and the mother of seven children, the youngest of whom was Ida, a girl who joined the Tamil Tigers at the age of 17 after two of her brothers were murdered by government-aligned militias. While the Tamil Tigers are one of the few armed groups that prohibit sexual relations among their members, Ida was fated for an end of devastating sexual violence. After serving four years as a Tiger guerrilla, she decided to surrender to the government and go home. Assured by government security officers that no harm would come to her from the police or state-aligned forces, she returned. Within months, however, five masked men arrived early one morning at the family house. A neighbor who saw the men before putting on their masks identified them as government soldiers from a local army camp. The soldiers beat, gagged and tied Sebastiana, her other children and grandchildren, and dragged them to the courtyard in front of the house. They then turned to Ida. As the vicious assault on her daughter commenced only a few feet away, Sebastiana managed to free her hands and feet, and ran screaming to the local police station, begging the police to come and help. "We cannot come now," they replied calmly. "You need to go home." By the time Sebastiana returned home, her daughter was dead. An autopsy would show that she had been repeatedly raped, shot in the genitals and mutilated. Faced with the horrific murder of her third child, Sebastiana tells Briggs simply, "I have lost all faith in human beings." The five soldiers who carried out the assault have still not been brought to justice.

A *Long Way Gone*, Beah's harrowing account of the civil war in his native Sierra Leone, provides the fullest picture of just how inexorable the plunge into war is for many children. "The first time I was touched by war," recalls Beah in this deeply eloquent and moving memoir, the first ever to be written by a former child soldier, "I was twelve. It was in January of 1993." Not long after the outbreak of hostilities between the government and the RUF in 1991, Beah's village was attacked and destroyed by rebels, and he was separated from his family amid the turmoil. As village after village fell prey to the destruction and chaos of war, he and a number of friends took refuge in the forests of Sierra Leone, in order to escape the fighting. It was only a matter of time before the boys—hungry, homeless and in constant fear for their lives—were drawn into the war. Captured by soldiers, they were given an ultimatum: Stay and fight with the army or fend for themselves against the rebels. Detained

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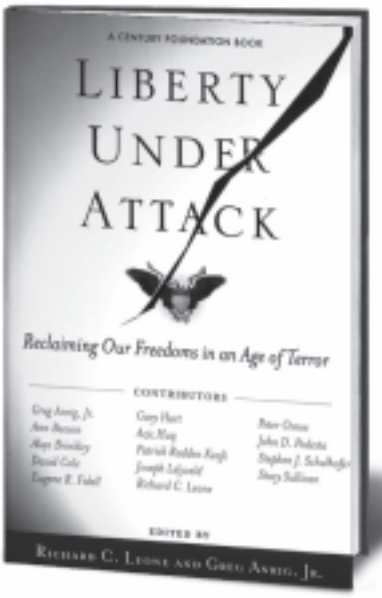
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Alan Brinkley • Aziz Huq • John D. Podesta
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in a village surrounded by rebels, Beah and his companions were left with little choice. Beah recalls one boy, Alhaji, explaining the dilemma they faced and insisting, "'The rebels will kill anyone from this village because they consider us their enemy, spies, or that we have sided with the other side of the war.… It is better to stay here for now.' He sighed. We had no choice. Leaving the village was as good as being dead."

For the next few weeks, Beah and the others went through a strict regimen of indoctrination and training. The leaders of Beah's contingent spent hours lecturing the boys about the rebels, instilling hatred for them. Beah remembers one lieutenant telling them, "They have lost everything that makes them human. They do not deserve to live. That is why we must kill every single one of them. Think of it as destroying a great evil." The indoctrination soon began to have an effect. Listening to one of the lieutenant's lectures, Beah recalls, "I stood there holding my gun and felt special because I was part of something that took me seriously and I was not running from anyone anymore." In training, the boys learned how to kill. Captured rebels would be tied up, and Beah and other boys would then take part in throat-slitting competitions: "The person whose prisoner died quickest would win the contest." Once they began regularly engaging in battles against the rebels, they were given marijuana, cocaine and "brown brown"—a mixture of gunpowder and cocaine—to increase their energy and fearlessness in combat.

Within weeks of this daily cycle of indoctrination, violence and drugs, the boys became inured to killing. "The idea of death didn't cross my mind at all and killing had become as easy as drinking water," recalls Beah. "My mind had not only snapped during the first killing, it had also stopped making remorseful records, or so it seemed." Surrounded and trapped by chaos, Beah quickly adapted to war as a way of life: "The villages that we captured and turned into our bases as we went along and the forests that we slept in became my home. My squad was my family, my gun was my provider and protector, and my rule was to kill or be killed.… I felt no pity for anyone."

If Beah's memoir depicts how easily children are lured into combat, it also examines how difficult it is for them to emerge from it. At the age of 15, after two years of serving with the army, Beah was suddenly demobilized under a UNICEF program aimed at rehabilitating child soldiers. His commanders ordered his gun to be taken away, and he and several boys were shipped to a rehabilitation center in Freetown, the capital. For Beah and his companions, the transition to civilian life would prove to be a battle in itself. Habituated to the chaos and lawlessness of war, desensitized to violence and addicted to drugs, the boys at first could not adjust.

In the rehabilitation center, the problems started immediately. Child soldiers who had fought for the army, such as Beah, suddenly found themselves face to face with child soldiers who had fought for the rebels, and the two sides instantly turned on each other. In one twenty-minute fight, six boys—mostly from the rebel side—were stabbed and shot to death with weapons the children had smuggled into the center, and the two groups had to be placed in separate compounds. Beah and his companions also turned on the center's staff, infuriated at having to take orders from "sissy civilians." They attacked and beat the cooks, cleaners and nurses responsible for them. When there was no one else to fight, the boys fought one another: "We would fight for hours in between meals, for no reason at all. During these fights, we destroyed most of the furniture and threw the mattresses out in the yard."

Desensitized to violence and often shunned by their neighbors, former child soldiers find it extremely difficult to re-enter civilian life.

Denied cocaine and marijuana for the first time in years, the boys also began to suffer from withdrawal symptoms. Beah remembers, "My hands had begun to shake uncontrollably and my migraines returned with a vengeance. It was as if a blacksmith had an anvil in my head." All of the fear and anxiety suppressed during his years as a soldier began to surface, and he was plagued by nightmares and anxiety attacks. "I would dream that a faceless gunman had tied me up and begun to slit my throat with the zigzag edge of his bayonet. I would feel the pain that the knife inflicted as the man sawed my neck. I'd wake up sweating and throwing punches in the air."

Slowly, however, things began to change for Beah. With the friendship and guidance of one of the nurses, he managed to overcome his drug addiction and his predilection for violence and finally began sharing and coming to terms with his war experiences. His progress was such that he was asked to become a spokesperson for the center, representing it to outside donors and agencies. He was chosen to go to the United Nations in New York for a conference on issues affecting children around the world. There, he met Laura Simms, a facilitator at the conference. Before Beah left, Simms gave him her number and address and told him to keep in touch. Little did Beah know then that Simms would eventually become his adoptive mother. Back in Sierra Leone, UNICEF was unable to locate Beah's immediate family members, who most likely had perished in the war. However, he was reunited with an uncle who lived in Freetown and was welcomed with open arms by that family. Beah moved in with them and began attending school regularly for the first time in years.

Finally, it seemed, Beah had escaped the war for good. But the war—which had been confined to the villages and rural areas—followed him to the capital. Soon after moving in with his uncle's family, Beah awoke one spring morning in 1997 to the sound of gunshots. The radio announced that a contingent of the army and the RUF had united and overthrown the civilian government. Over the next months, Freetown turned into a war zone. The united soldiers and rebels, or "Sobels," as they were called, began blowing up bank vaults and occupying schools and university campuses. Armed men looted most of the food from shops and markets, leaving the population on the brink of starvation. Groups of gunmen roamed the streets raping and killing people at random. For most of the city dwellers, venturing out of the house meant risking death. For Beah, there was the added fear that if he was captured he would be forced to become a soldier again. All the progress he had struggled so hard to achieve over the past year was on the brink of disintegrating.

He decided to take action. "I had to leave, because I was afraid that if I stayed in Freetown any longer, I was going to end up being a soldier again or my former army friends would kill me if I refused. Some friends who had undergone rehabilitation with me had already rejoined the army." He managed to make a collect call to Simms in New York and asked her if he could come and live with her if he managed to get out of the country. She agreed. Beah succeeded in sneaking across the border to Guinea and made it to Conakry, the capital. The rest, as they say, is history. Beah ended up in New York, where Simms adopted him. He went on to finish school and graduated from Oberlin College in 2004.

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Most child soldiers, however, are not so lucky. Attempting to emerge from war with no education and no economic prospects, often stigmatized and shunned by communities because of their participation in war and with no family or social support, many children relapse into soldiering, perpetuating the cycle of war and sowing the seeds of violence for generations to come. Since its publication, Beah's book has become something of a sensation: It has reached the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list and has been featured by Starbucks, which is selling the book in its cafes across the country—and, soon, around Britain. While the attention the memoir has generated attests to an emerging interest in and concern for the plight of child soldiers, this interest also indicates a shift, if not a decline, in moral sensibility. We are no longer shocked by children being killed in war but by children killing in war.

Yet even the moral indignation aroused by the phenomenon of child soldiering has not been enough to stop, or even contain, the trend. So far, international efforts to halt the exploitation of children as soldiers have been woefully ineffective. While the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)—which bans child soldiering—is the most widely ratified convention in the world, many signatory states pay lip service to it while continuing to recruit and exploit child soldiers. And while these states as well as nonstate armed groups are largely responsible for the continuing spread of child soldiering, developed countries also share the blame. The United States has played a particularly shameful role in blocking almost every international effort aimed at curtailing child soldiering. Not only is it one of two countries (along with Somalia) that have refused to ratify the CRC; in recent years it has opposed international efforts to limit the illicit trade in small arms, the very trade that is fueling so many of the conflicts in which child soldiers are involved. P.W. Singer points to the 2001 UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms as an example. At the conference, the National Rifle Association successfully lobbied the Bush Administration to oppose any UN measures to make international small arms sales more transparent. How regulations on the international trade in small arms could affect Americans' right to tote guns—the NRA's fixation—is inexplicable.

The International Criminal Court, established in 2002 to prosecute those responsible for human rights abuses and war crimes, is another international instrument with the potential to counter the exploitation of child soldiers. The ICC's mandate treats the use of child soldiers as a war crime and allows for the prosecution and punishment of armed group leaders who exploit children. In its crusade to exempt itself from any sort of international accountability, however, the United States has been rabidly opposed to the ICC, going out of its way to impugn the court's credibility.

Speaking in Paris at a recent conference on child soldiers, Beah insisted that "no one is born violent. No child in Africa, Latin America or Asia wants to be part of war." Beah's message is yet to be heard. Until underlying causes such as poverty and the spread of small arms are addressed, and as long as those who exploit child soldiers go unpunished, children are destined to remain a fixed feature of warfare, helping to perpetuate instability and violence in the developing world. Ironically, at a time when many intellectuals fret over "just war" theory—the waging of war according to moral principles—the use of child soldiers is more widespread than ever. Things are awry indeed when society's youngest and most vulnerable citizens are made to fight the wars of adults and are turned into murderous aggressors in the process. ■

The Imaginary Jew

WILLIAM DERESIEWICZ

THE YIDDISH POLICEMEN'S UNION. By Michael Chabon. HarperCollins. 414 pp. $26.95.

THE MINISTRY OF SPECIAL CASES. By Nathan Englander. Knopf. 339 pp. $25.

American Jewish experience is not what it used to be, and neither is American Jewish fiction. During the three decades after World War II, American Jews were still making the trek from city to suburb, working to middle class, immigration to assimilation. The old country was still fresh in memory, its accents and attitudes still potent in their hold over feeling and expression. Anti-Semitism was still pervasive, the Holocaust a recent event, Israel a source of unmitigated pride. The American Jewish writers who emerged during those years gave form to those experiences (and to those of a still earlier time, the prewar decades during which they had grown up) with a power and virtuosity that brought them to the front rank of American letters: Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, Cynthia Ozick and, in authorized translation, Isaac Bashevis Singer.

But over the past three decades, the dense particularity of American Jewish life has, outside the Orthodox community, largely disappeared. No one speaks Yiddish anymore, or even English that sounds like Yiddish. There may be suburbs with a lot of Jews, but there are no Jewish suburbs as there were once Jewish neighborhoods. With Jews as senators and governors and Ivy League presidents, the wounding, binding sense of exclusion has melted away. Communal institutions remain strong, traditions are still cherished, but American Jewish experience is now, by and large, simply American experience. Jewish mothers don't say "Ess, ess" anymore; they say, "Do you want me to call Sophia's mom to make a playdate?"

While there are young Jewish writers aplenty, no important voice has emerged to speak about contemporary Jewish life. Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude*, perhaps the finest recent novel by a young Jewish writer, is not about being Jewish at all; it's about the quintessentially American subject of race. But there have always been Jewish writers who have chosen to speak about things other than being Jewish (most notably, in the Bellow-Roth generation, Norman Mailer and J.D. Salinger). What's really telling about the current state of Jewish fiction is that even those prominent young writers who do speak about Jewish experience don't speak about contemporary experience.

In other words, they don't speak about their own experience. The most celebrated of these authors are probably the two under review here and Jonathan Safran Foer. Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* reaches back to the Holocaust and the grandparental generation (as does Daniel Mendelsohn's acclaimed recent memoir *The*

William Deresiewicz is a regular contributor to the Books & the Arts section.

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Lost). Michael Chabon's Pulitzer Prize–winning *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* is set in New York and Prague during the war; his new novel, a work of counterfactual history like Roth's *The Plot Against America*, in an imaginary Jewish autonomous region in the Alaskan panhandle. About half the stories in Nathan Englander's PEN/Malamud Award–winning *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges* are set in the Orthodox world of his youth, but the two strongest are allegorical tales of European persecution, and his new novel takes place in Argentina during the "dirty war" of the late 1970s.

There's nothing wrong with any of this, but the phenomenon does cry out for explanation. It's hard enough giving reasons why someone chooses to write something, let alone why he chooses not to, but Chabon's work offers a clue. The narrator-protagonist of his first novel, *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, is the son of a Jewish gangster. The narrator-protagonist of his second novel, *Wonder Boys*, is a gentile married to a Jew, and his account of her family's Passover Seder draws its brilliance and wicked humor from his outsider's defamiliarizing gaze. Chabon's detective novella *The Final Solution* centers on the relationship between a young German-Jewish refugee and Sherlock Holmes. *Gentlemen of the Road*, the tale just serialized in *The New York Times Magazine*, follows a group of adventurers in the tenth-century Jewish kingdom of the Khazars. It's safe to say that Chabon likes his Jews exotic or, more to the point, wants to recharge Judaism with a sense of the exotic, a sense that the horizon of Jewish experience is wider than the boundaries of middle-class American life. As for Englander, who grew up on Long Island, he recently quipped in an interview about his new work that "in terms of personal experience, my only other option was to set this novel at the Roosevelt Field mall."

My own experience tells me that American Judaism has long been beset by a deep sense of banality and inauthenticity. To the usual self-contempt of the liberal middle class is added the feeling that genuine Jewish life is always elsewhere: in Israel or the shtetl, among the immigrant generation or the ultra-Orthodox. Jewish culture as lived by the non-Orthodox tends to feel bland and thin even to its practitioners—the last, worn coins of a princely inheritance. (To those who have fled Orthodox backgrounds, like Englander and myself, that very different milieu tends to feel, for all its traditionalism, spiritually dead.) The most visible of the current generation of self-consciously Jewish novelists appear to be avoiding their own experience because their own experience just seems too boring. What is there to say about it? Better to write about a time or place where there was more at stake.

That's certainly what Chabon does in his remarkable new novel. *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* invents an entire world out of whole cloth, one almost comparable in scope to the Republic of Costaguana in Conrad's *Nostromo*, though Chabon's models were more likely the science fiction he's talked about having loved since he was a kid. The district of Sitka, we're given to understand, was set up in 1940 as a refuge for Jews fleeing Hitler. Since then, it's maintained uneasy relationships with the Alaska Natives, with American Jews and with the American government itself, since the settlement was only ever intended to be provisional. But with Israel, in this universe, having lost its war of independence, the Sitka Jews, forbidden from entering the United States proper, have nowhere else to go. In their sixty years of existence, they've built up a complete Yiddish-speaking society on their narrow strip of gloomy coast. Since this is a hard-boiled detective story, we tend to see that society's underside: cops, gangsters, hookers and junkies; historical events like the Shavuos Massacre and the Synagogue Riots; Sholem-Aleykhem Park and Max Nordau Street; the Polar-Shtern Kafeteria and Bronfman U.

Reading the novel is like wandering through a dream where the State of Israel has been crossbred with Raymond Chandler's Los Angeles and 1930s Warsaw. We encounter the familiar Jewish sociology of *Yekkes* vs. *Galitzers* (Jews from Germany vs. those from Polish Galicia), the religious semiology of needlework yarmulkes vs. velvet yarmulkes vs. black hats. A cop is a "shammes" (watchman), a detective a "noz" (nose), a cellphone a "Shoyfer." The slang for "fellow" is "yid."

The wit and brio of Chabon's inventiveness are unfailingly delightful, but he's also playing a deeper game. Sitka is Chabon's laboratory for creating something that never had a chance to exist in the real world: a modern Jewish society that embodies the spirit of traditional European Jewish life—its language, its mentality, its ways. Israel was founded as a historical break with Diaspora (hence, among other things, the revival of Hebrew as an alternative to Yiddish), and its establishment as a haven and beacon created a discontinuity of experience within the Diaspora itself. Even the Diaspora is no longer the Diaspora. But in Sitka, it is. Chabon's model world

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is an arena for exploring the Jewish psyche under conditions of purity and pressure that don't exist in real life.

For Sitka's Jews aren't just ghettoized and concentrated; they are also on the verge of expulsion. The novel is set on the eve of "Reversion," when the district will go back to Alaskan control and its 2 million Jews will be left scrambling to find the next land of exile. The story begins in classic hard-boiled fashion, when a dead body is discovered in the flophouse where Detective Meyer Landsman, our embittered but oddly noble anti-hero, has been making love to a bottle of slivovitz since splitting with his wife. But as Landsman starts to pull on that one thread, the whole story of Sitka and Reversion begins to unravel. The anonymous corpse turns out to be connected to a sect of ultra-Orthodox gangsters, in turn connected to a series of shady operators and shadowy figures intent on finding a Messiah to lead the Jewish people out of Alaska and into the Promised Land.

This is, of course, the eternal Jewish situation: poised between the sea and a pursuing host, praying for deliverance. And not just literally. Chabon shoves his Jews up against the edge of the world because that's where Jews always are. "But there was always a shortfall, wasn't there?… Between commandment and observance, heaven and earth…Zion and Jew. They called that shortfall 'the world.'" And so in this story, too, the father's impossible demands for perfect obedience: Abraham's of Isaac, God's of the Children of Israel. And so also the disillusioned melancholy, the mordant humor: "Like most of his mother's compliments, it was convertible to an insult when needed"; "'What my husband tells me,' she says, making it sound rhetorical, like the title of a very slim tract"; "his body emits a weary sound, a Yiddish sound, halfway between a belch and a lamentation"; "It's Messiah.… What else can you do but wait?" *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* is about no Jews who have ever lived, but it is one of the best novels in English about what it means to be a Jew, and how it feels.

In fact, the book is so good not despite taking place in an imaginary world but because of it. Chabon has gotten into trouble before when he's tried to re-create a historical situation he hasn't experienced himself. *Kavalier & Clay*, which lists more than forty consulted sources in its "author's note," never succeeds in making its world seem more than secondhand. This is obviously a minority view—the book was a huge bestseller—but never for one minute did I believe its characters were fully real. The materials may all have been there, painstakingly assembled, but as with the golem who appears in its pages, the magic formula was missing that would quicken them to life.

I mention this only because the same problem besets Englander's new work. *The Ministry of Special Cases* also lists a healthy number of sources in the back, seeks to re-create a time and place of which its author has little or no firsthand knowledge and feels, to me at least, imaginatively dead. Englander has said that he didn't spend much time in Argentina researching the book, and I believe him. The story concerns a Jewish couple searching for their teenage son, who has been "disappeared" by the regime, and given its subject matter and its author's reputation, I wouldn't be surprised if it receives rave reviews. But though the streets and the buildings are all, undoubtedly, accurately described, there's little sense of the human world they once represented. The novel focuses so narrowly on Kaddish, Lillian and their son, Pato, that the social milieu in which they live—which is much harder to work up from books than other kinds of historical particulars but is ultimately what gives a character specificity and depth—remains unrealized. We don't know how this world smells or sounds, can't feel the weight of the characters' histories,

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never find out who Kaddish and Lillian's friends are, or ever were. Aside from a couple of minor figures, the characters remain one-dimensional, the whole situation largely schematic.

The Jewish and Argentine parts of the story are also essentially unrelated. Kaddish is an *hijo de puta*, a son of a whore, and a child of Buenos Aires's old Jewish underworld, and as such he is shunned by the respectable members of the community. But those upright citizens, or at least the ones who also have underworld roots, do have a use for him: They pay him to chisel their forebears' names off their tombstones, lest anyone start drawing unwelcome connections. When one of his customers, a plastic surgeon, can't afford the bill, he pays by giving Kaddish and Lillian free nose jobs. The symbolism is not hard to decipher: These Jews are all chipping away at their identities, effacing their Jewishness so as to fit the profile of gentile, anti-Semitic Argentina. But Pato's disappearance, though Englander seems to want us to read it as a parallel effacement, has nothing to do with any of that. He's not arrested because he's Jewish, he's arrested because he's a leftist, and Kaddish and Lillian are not stymied in their pitiable efforts to retrieve him because they're Jewish either. Nor is their response to the tragedy significantly inflected by their Jewishness, though Englander makes some largely symbolic gestures in that direction (including the choice of Kaddish's name). The two parts of the story exert little creative pressure on each other.

Another difference between these two novels is their language. In literature, style is the main transmission cable of imaginative force. Whether a novelist can conjure feeling and compel belief rests less on what he or she tells us than on how. Chabon's vivid style is charged not primarily by his alert diction or tight syntax or ear for idiom or even by his keen sense of humor but by his prodigious talent for simile and metaphor. Consider the following passage, in which the figures of speech have been italicized:

> He stands by the window, watching the sky that is *like a mosaic pieced together from the broken shards of a thousand mirrors, each one tinted a different shade of gray*. The winter sky of southeastern Alaska *is a Talmud of gray, an inexhaustible commentary on a Torah of rain clouds and dying light*. Uncle Hertz has always been the most competent, self-assured man Landsman knows, *neat as an origami airplane, a quick paper needle folded with precision, impervious to turbulence*. Accurate, methodical, dispassionate. There were always hints of shadow, of irrationality and violence, but they were contained behind *the wall of* Hertz's mysterious Indian adventures, hidden on the far side of the Line, covered over by him with *the careful backward kicks of an animal concealing its spoor*. But now a memory surfaces in Landsman from the days following his father's death, of Uncle Hertz sitting crumpled *like a wad of tissue* in a corner of the kitchen on Adler Street, shirttails hanging, no order to this hair, shirt misbuttoned, the dwindling contents of a bottle of slivovitz on the kitchen table beside him *marking like a barometer the plummeting atmosphere of his grief*.

The density of figuration is unusually high even by Chabon's standards, though not by much. Its brilliance is not unusual at all. The most elaborate of these figures, "Talmud/Torah," grows out of the novel's thematics, but the rest take their range from everyday experience (Chabon is clearly someone on whom nothing is lost) and seem to come to him (but undoubtedly only seem to) as easily as breathing. Each radiates implications and associations—Uncle Hertz's persona as artfully self-fashioned; Uncle Hertz as an unclean, cunning beast; the snot and tears of grief—that amplify the literal, linear sense of the passage. This is how Chabon gives his writing its reach, by continually unfolding

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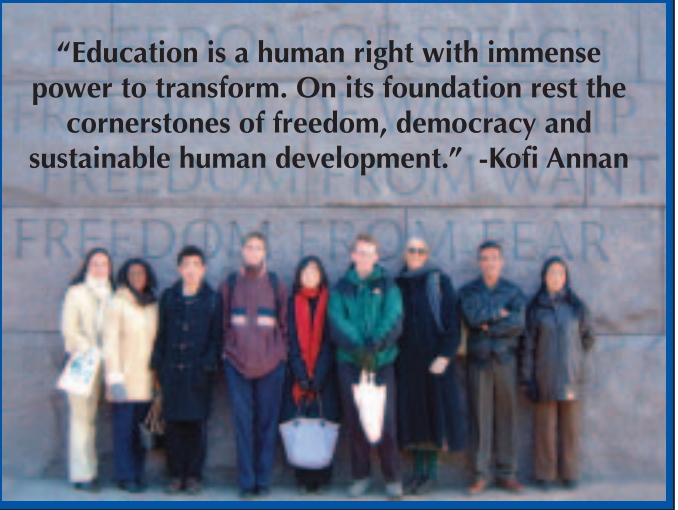
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half-conscious extensions of feeling and meaning in every direction.

Englander's prose, by contrast, is prostrate. Sometimes it's not even grammatically correct. Dangling participles are a specialty of his; this sentence manages to pack in both a dangling participle and a misplaced modifier: "The table itself was upholstered in fine leather and padded, so that in jotting down the names twice Kaddish's pen poked through." (What exactly do book editors do these days?) More often his writing is simply clumsy or unclear or flat. After more than 100 pages of clanking preliminary exposition, the novel does finally start to wake up with Pato's disappearance, especially in a series of confrontations in which Kaddish and Lillian vent their rage, sometimes improbably, at figures of authority. Englander's writing gets better at this point, too, as if he'd finally reached the part that interests him.

But he also violates, late in the game, the novel's point of view—which had been confined after Pato's disappearance to one or the other of his parents—in order to convey certain information about the young man as well as to inject a spurious note of lyricism into the proceedings. This isn't just a technical matter; the story's dramatic tension had depended on our sharing Kaddish and Lillian's ignorance of their son's fate, but then Englander decides to try to have it both ways. I don't think Englander's first book, *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*, was nearly as good as everyone said—its two allegorical tales are strong, but its half-dozen stories of contemporary Orthodox life lead up, in my view, to some pretty feeble epiphanies—but it was certainly better than this. Given that it's been eight years since the previous volume, it's safe to assume that Englander ran into a lot of problems with the new book, and if so, many of them were never solved. The novel feels like it was written in handcuffs.

There is one respect in which Englander's book has the advantage over Chabon's, and that has to do with the writers' choices of genre. Chabon has spoken frequently about his love of "genre" fiction—horror stories, ghost stories, spy stories and so forth—and it is clearly part of his project to reclaim those forms for serious literature. His last four works all make use of such forms: the hard-boiled detective story here, the genteel detective story in *The Final Solution*, the adventure story in *Gentlemen of the Road* and the fantasy story in *Summerland*, a novel for young adults. There are also strong genre elements in *Kavalier & Clay*. A born storyteller, Chabon handles the conventions in each case with practiced skill, and in at least two cases, here and *The Final Solution*, he succeeds in endowing his adopted forms with the significance of high art.

But the new novel also shows the limits of his project. Throughout its history, the novel has refreshed itself by drawing from the well of popular fiction. Cervantes appropriated chivalric romance, the airport novels of his day, in founding modern European fiction with *Don Quixote*. Jane Austen began her career by rewriting the Gothic and sentimental novels of the late eighteenth century. James Joyce makes use of popular forms at several points in *Ulysses*. The appropriation of genre conventions infuses serious fiction with the energy and exuberance of popular writing. It reconnects high art with the novel's eternal source in sheer readerly pleasure, serving as an antidote to academic effeteness, snobbish fastidiousness, solipsistic introspection and arid formal experimentation. No wonder the practice largely stopped with Joyce—most novelists since have been too nervous about being taken seriously to be seen trafficking with low forms—and no wonder Chabon wants to revive it.

Chabon's invented Jewish Alaska has a rich complexity of Jewish meanings—in stark contrast to today's American Jewish experience.

The difference between him and Cervantes, Austen and Joyce is that the older writers all made use of popular forms in the spirit of parody. They didn't simply reproduce them; they rewrote them so as to appropriate their energy while simultaneously marking their limitations. In each case, they used the falsifications of ossified conventions—the improbability of chivalric romance or Gothic fiction, the emotional mendacity of sentimentalism—as a springboard to a reinvigorated realism. The novel has continually renewed itself not by embracing genre fiction but by arguing with it. Here, Chabon lets himself get trapped by it. The novel's plot keeps you turning the pages, but because the conventions of its chosen genre are so firmly established, its surprises are entirely predictable: The dick will run afoul of his superiors but press ahead nevertheless; the dick will fall into the bad guys' clutches but get rescued at the last minute; the dick will solve the murder, and turn his life around, in the final chapter. The profundity of Chabon's exploration of Jewish themes remains after the novel is over, but as with any detective story, the appeal of its plot evaporates once you learn how it turns out. And in the last chapters, because of the conventions Chabon has imposed on himself, his story gets away from him. Once the dimensions of the plot Landsman uncovers expand from the local to the geopolitical, the detective framework can no longer contain them, and the biggest events, which necessarily happen offstage, simply cease to seem real.

There's a more fundamental problem with Chabon's generic choice. Because the novel's plot moves are prescribed by its genre, the characters' choices are similarly prescribed. Freedom of will and uncertainty of fate, the constitutive features of the novel's existence as an arena of moral reflection—the constitutive features of any serious narrative art—are absent. The outcome is fixed rather than open, and the story drives the characters instead of the reverse. (It's no accident that, as Chabon has pointed out elsewhere, the common characteristic of all genre fiction is a strong plot.) But in *The Ministry of Special Cases*, the very essence of Kaddish and Lillian's situation is that they don't know how events will turn out, or even how to influence them. They wake up every day having to decide what to do to try to get their son back, and they don't even know if their efforts will make things worse. This is the novel's one strength: the sensitivity with which it traces the agonized process by which a mother and a father, individually and often at cross-purposes, try to wrest a child, or at least an answer, from a faceless and brutal bureaucracy.

This is not, as I noted, a particularly Jewish dilemma, and I half wonder why Englander felt the need to make his characters Jewish at all, especially since, given their estrangement from both the Jewish community and Jewish tradition, there's so very little that's Jewish about them. As for Chabon, it is telling that the rich complexity of Jewish meanings he manages to develop in an invented Jewish Alaska he has not thus far shown any faith in being able to locate in contemporary Jewish America. His novel is a stunning act of imagination, but it underscores all too clearly the extent to which American Jewish experience, insofar as it possesses the kind of density necessary for it to function as a substrate for fiction, is receding, precisely, into the realm of the imaginary. ■

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Clowns With Kalashnikovs

JAMES MILLER

PRAISED BE OUR LORDS: A Political Education.
By Régis Debray. Translated by John Howe. Verso. 328 pp. Paper $34.95.

Forty years ago, Régis Debray was a political celebrity and, to some, an existential hero. With his wild mustache and brooding gaze, he looked like Friedrich Nietzsche in battle fatigues—the gun-toting philosopher as atheist prophet. A guerrilla warrior who had joined Che Guevara and his band of rebels in Bolivia, he was a controversial theorist of revolution—and, after his capture in 1967, an international cause célèbre. His fame lasted longer than fifteen minutes but faded with the '60s. Yet in France to this day, he remains well-known as a commentator, essayist, novelist, playwright, autobiographer, media theorist, political philosopher and sometime participant in French politics who takes care to burnish his "brand image" at the website www.regisdebray.com.

Debray's new book in English, *Praised Be Our Lords*, is actually eleven years old. Though the English jacket calls it simply "The Autobiography," the translated text is the second in a trilogy of memoirs. The first volume recounts "an amorous education," the second "a political education," the third "an intellectual education"—the subtitles of each, of course, are an allusion to Flaubert's novel *Sentimental Education*.

Like Flaubert, Debray wants to write a moral history of the men of his generation—and like *Sentimental Education*, his memoir is a narrative of disillusion and thwarted passion. *Praised Be Our Lords* mainly concerns events in two decades: the '60s, which Debray spent largely in Latin America as a revolutionist in league with Fidel Castro; and the '80s, which Debray spent largely in a small office at the Elysée Palace as an adviser to the notionally socialist President François Mitterrand.

Debray was born in 1940 and grew up in a prosperous Paris neighborhood. A prodigy, he won the philosophy prize in the national *concours général* in 1956 and later won entrance to the elite École Normale Supérieure. In the first of what would become a series of political epiphanies, he beheld "in the year of grace 1958, coming out of the Janson-de-Sailly lycée in the avenue Henri-Martin, the black DS19 carrying Charles de Gaulle." Seduced by visions of great leaders and the idea of the omnipotent sovereign, he soon fell under the spell of Louis Althusser, his teacher at the École Normale, who converted him to Marxism and persuaded him to join the Communist Party.

Though he proved to be a brilliant exegete of historical materialism—perhaps the finest theorist of his generation—the young Debray decided that he "would follow Lenin's recommendation and become a 'professional revolutionary.'" Like André Malraux in 1922 and Paul Nizan in 1926, he fled France at his first opportunity, hoping to "take on the human condition at its sharpest."

He headed West (unlike Malraux and Nizan, who went, respectively, to Cambodia and Yemen). He spent six months in Cuba in 1961. Two years later, he went to South America for an improvised tour of the continent that lasted eighteen months. On this trip, he spent time in the ranks of the Falcón guerrilla army, based in the jungles of Venezuela. Flying home from Brazil at the end of 1964, he imagined building a new international movement in Latin America modeled on Lenin's Comintern.

Dropping out of the French Communist Party, Debray dreamed instead of becoming a secret agent, a freelance insurrectionist. "I identified," he explains, "much more strongly with Gary Cooper in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and Gian Maria Volonte in *Il terrorista* than with those edifying figurines Lenin, Mao, Rosa Luxemburg." His main chance, ironically, came through a bravura display of Marxist theorizing. In January 1965 Sartre's journal *Les Temps modernes* published a piece by Debray on "Castroism, or the Long March in Latin America." On a visit to Algeria, Che Guevara chanced upon a copy of the essay and had it translated into Spanish to pass on

James Miller, chair of the Liberal Studies program at the New School for Social Research, is the author of, among other books, Democracy Is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago *and* The Passion of Michel Foucault. *He is currently writing* Examined Lives: From Socrates to Nietzsche.

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to Fidel Castro. Impressed by the dialectical acumen of his theoretical doppelgänger, Castro personally invited the French Fidelista to Havana. "The dreamer lying in ambush" had his opening.

In Cuba Debray stumbled into a world straight out of a Buñuel farce. Treated like a bourgeois dignitary, the 25-year-old writer was provided with a car and a driver, a hotel room with a balcony, a private lift and a white telephone ("it was like being in the movies"). But like every other VIP of the World Revolution, he was forced to kill time. Castro liked to heighten the expectations of the elect, sending an intermediary to announce that "Fidel wants to see you"—and then making the chosen one wait for up to three months before an audience was actually granted.

When the moment came, the sovereign paced "like a wild beast in a cage," his torrent of words conjuring up a heroic struggle, treating Debray as a confidant, a co-conspirator, a militant "indispensable to the proper course of things, someone on whom the ruler was going to be able to depend at last." In return, Fidel asked only that Debray undertake a crash course in the art of war. Debray acquiesced with brio, giddy to be given access to a "fabulous Aladdin's cave for weapons freaks," thrilled to learn the martial arts, how to handle explosives, surveillance and countersurveillance, techniques of assassination.

Castro had found his John Reed—a fervent convert and foreign correspondent enraptured by the prospect of epochal social change. His guerrilla training finished, Debray set himself to explain to armchair radicals around the world just how the Cubans were paving the way for a *Revolution in the Revolution?*, as he grandly titled his pamphlet. Written with an air of Cartesian rigor, the essay was meant "to convince that town mouse the urban Marxist" of the virtues of rural guerrilla warfare. The Cubans printed 300,000 copies in Spanish, and within months Debray's "primer for Marxist insurrection" (as *Newsweek* magazine called it) had been translated into most of the major languages, including English.

Though brief, it is a remarkably abstract, often dry text, which the author now dismisses as "a bad grafting of ideas onto passion, and doctrine onto conjuncture." But when it was published in the United States in 1967, just as protests against the war in Vietnam were taking a turn toward violent confrontation, the book was something of an event. By making a willingness to brave death for an ideal seem like tough-minded realism, Debray's screed helped to reinforce a certain mood on the young left of grim conviction and apocalyptic hope.

Debray himself is remarkably insouciant about the most alarming aspects of his contribution to the theory and practice of the '60s New Left. "You had to get a bit worked up to believe that a handful of clowns with Kalashnikovs were going to 'make revolution,'" he dryly recalls. "But everyone did believe it, friends and enemies both."

These are the years when Debray was a real witness to history in the making—he was the last intermediary between Castro and Che Guevara, ferrying the leader's views from Havana to Che's jungle redoubt in Bolivia. Che's desperate gambit he now calls "a true masterpiece of political anti-art"—a "holy war, extremely limited in means, but total in its lack of precision and the absence of negotiable aims or possible areas of compromise, which could only end with the annihilation of the enemy or, failing that (more likely actually), himself." It's no wonder that Che liked to compare himself to an early Christian in the catacombs—it was salvation and not victory that he sought.

A willing accessory to Che's final folly, Debray almost became a martyr himself. Captured and imprisoned, he got to experience a simulated execution: April 1967, six rifles leveled at ten paces, his wrists handcuffed, no shots fired. There were other tortures, too, accompanied by an international hue and cry, letters demanding Debray's release signed by Sartre in France and by the New York intellectuals in America.

At his trial, his defense was that he was a journalist, an innocent reporter, a wandering idealist—which was a lie, Debray admits: "In reality I had carried a weapon and taken part in the first ambush; I had fired, I believe without killing anyone; I was not there to interview people but to follow orders."

At the time of his arrest, Debray was 27 years old. He was roughly the same age as John Lennon—and like Lennon, he was fated to experience the most exciting years of his life before he turned 30.

Even worse, his four years in prison meant that this icon of the era had missed the whole of the "swinging" '60s: About the Beatles, or May '68 in Paris, he knew little. When he was finally freed from prison in 1971, he was a man out of sync

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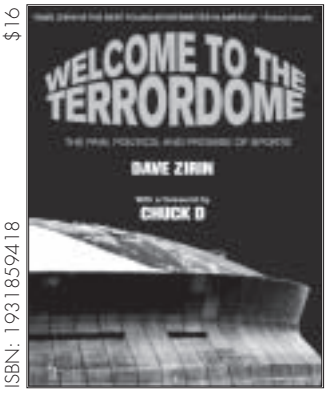

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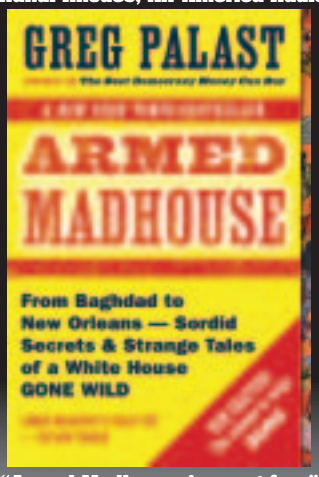

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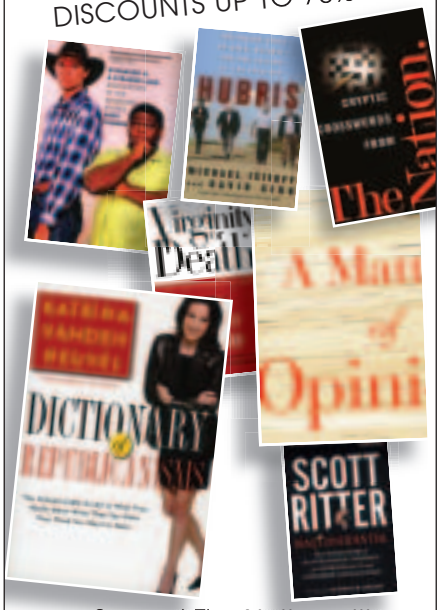

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with his time, and with his most intense moments of happiness behind him:

> In Latin America our weapons were pathetic, our plans crazed, our considerable efforts without much effect, yet when I mull over those years now they emit an aura of seriousness, something authentic and luminous. And there were truly radiant moments, times when physical well-being verged on the unreal; the magical sensations I remember from a solitary exploration on foot of the mountainous jungles of Bolivia in 1966, a few months before joining Guevara. From my passage among "men of power" in France, a "serious" situation in a country of repute that counts in the world, I retain—perhaps because the body had so little to do with the transaction—no memories of pure or full joy. Despite the interesting foreign visits, the wealth of information gathered, the vanities of petty importance, I cannot rid myself of a sense of artificiality and emptiness. Maruiac used to say that in politics one cannot be happy twice.

The best parts of Debray's memoir, like this passage, are of a very high order: lucid, lyrical, full of feeling.

But other parts, alas, are prolix, self-absorbed and full of specious casuistry. "We are all Gauleiters," he asserts with peremptory confidence. Well, no, most of us are not Gauleiters—simply because most of us, for better or worse, aren't nearly as fixated on fantasies of sovereign power as Monsieur Debray elsewhere confesses that he is. ("To tell the truth I could not cry: 'King Fidel is dead!' until I was able to continue with equal piety, in the same breath: 'Long live King François, his oak and our rose!'")

The 1970s were something of a lost decade for Debray. He championed the "third way" of Salvador Allende—a radical socialist program pursued through moderate and legal means—and Allende, following in Castro's footsteps, treated him as a confidante. After Allende's overthrow, Debray drifted back to Cuba, where he grew progressively disenchanted with Castro's dictatorship. Home in France, he took "an openly reformist line"—and thus came into contact with the leader of France's resurgent Socialist Party, François Mitterrand.

Explaining his recurrent pledges of fealty to rulers like Mitterrand, he cites as precursors Seneca and Voltaire, and characteristically quotes Malraux, a mythomaniac as self-exculpating as Debray: "'It's too late to act on something,' Malraux once said, 'one can now only act on someone.' This despairing observation holds good for all time"—as if Seneca had no choice but to tutor Nero, and Voltaire had been forced to accept the patronage of Frederick the Great.

Acknowledging the expectation that he will express some sort of remorse for at least some of the more reckless passages in his political life, he stubbornly demurs. "How simple everything would be," he writes, "if communism had just been a machine for making prison camps! The curse (or the blessing, I am not sure which) is that between the crimes it produced fraternity, self-denial, optimism, courage and generosity." Castro's Communism was "a corrupting and uplifting machine for making people worse and better than they are." He cannot forget "the superior human qualities of the militants who kept the inhuman machine running."

A crafty rhetorician, Debray is disarmingly honest about his dishonest tendencies: "A philosopher is someone who does not want to lie to himself. The problem (as can be seen from this very text) is that no one makes History without doing so a lot, *in petto*." He comes across as a paragon of "sinuousness," to borrow a term that he applies to Mitterrand: "The great accompanist of his time espoused its caprices and tendencies so earnestly that he was incapable on any given day of uttering a hint of contrition for the previous one. He absolved himself every time, for he had been sincere and wholehearted throughout."

In the second half of *Praised Be Our Lords*, Debray chronicles his years alongside Mitterrand in power, serving the French Republic. Like everyone else on the French left, he welcomed his master's election in 1981 as a historical turning point for socialism in France. At first, he advised the president on foreign policy and served as an informal liaison with Parisian intellectuals: One of his duties was to invite luminaries like Fernand Braudel and Michel Foucault to dinners at the Elysée, and another was to convene experts on sensitive parts of the world—India, the Middle East, the USSR—to meet with Mitterrand and offer their advice.

But his new master let him down. And some of his comments are withering: "A de Gaulle grasps things at the root, a Mitterrand by the leaves." Nobody was killed, a strong franc was created, a new generation of technocrats was trained: "I had passed from faith without method in one continent

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to method without faith in the other."

So at the end of the "political education" that Debray recounts, what has our sinuous hero learned? In one chapter, he proffers "Advice to the Younger Generation," and some of it comes as a shock. "Reality," he avers, "is the media, and facts are images of facts"—a proposition that is neither true nor original. He speaks of the glory of war, the satisfactions of faith, the sentiment of patriotism, the durability of myth—"where there is institution there is superstition"—again, not exactly novel ideas, as the author well knows (citing, as he does, such eloquent precursors as Georges Sorel and Ernst Junger).

At one point, Debray exhorts his readers (he is, of course, exhorting himself too) to "break with disenchantment," since the one who is disenchanted "is still a good prospect for enchanters." But this is easier said than done.

In the pages of this memoir, he swings erratically from cynical resignation to sentimental defiance. He is too in love with illusion—the joys it can bring, the power it can serve—to give it up altogether. Perhaps that is why in 2007, more than a decade after completing this provisional settling of political accounts, Régis Debray is still *engagé*—an old-fashioned French intellectual, a melancholy militant, quixotically in quest of a left that won't be left behind, devoted as ever, despite himself, to the traditional ideals of the French Revolution (liberty, equality, fraternity), once more urging the saving remnant into combat in the columns of *Le Monde*.

"What can I say?" he asks with a shrug. "It isn't proper history, but it's my history. Sorry, there's nothing I can do about it now." ■

The Virtual Realist

GENE SEYMOUR

FOUR NOVELS OF THE 1960s: The Man in the High Castle, The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch, Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep, Ubik. By Philip K. Dick. Library of America. 830 pp. $35.

We can download all of Brahms, Shostakovich, Nat King Cole and the Beau Brummels onto a single microchip and pick up Barcelona weather reports on our cellphones during an Orioles game. But shrink-wrapping ourselves in digital cocoons threatens to leave big blank patches in our intimate knowledge of the world and its history. We can find water on another planet's moon, but we don't know where to begin shedding indulgences to save our own glaciers—and ourselves. DNA is supposed to help us recognize and embrace individual difference. But we insist on abasing ourselves with sweeping generalities about race, gender, sexuality and class.

In short: These may indeed be the days of miracle and wonder, but we're still just as fucked-up-and-full-of-it as we always were. Whether we're ready to make that leap of judgment or not, it's always been science fiction that figures it out before we do. The wide open spaces between technological possibility and human limitation have provided fertile ground for inspired imaginative speculation going back almost 200 years to *Frankenstein*. It feels safe to say that no one has moved through those spaces with as much loony abandon and frenzied inventiveness as Philip Kindred Dick.

Somehow, it figures that someone as deeply, profoundly fucked-up-and-full-of-it as Dick has become, at millennium's turn, the most influential and prophetic of late-twentieth-century science fiction writers. Even a peer such as Thomas Disch, who could write far better sentences in succession than Dick, has been moved to proclaim him "a science fiction writer's science fiction writer" and go on in the same piece to quote other, similarly gifted stylists of the genre such as John Brunner, Norman Spinrad ("the greatest American novelist of the second half of the twentieth century") and Harlan Ellison (science fiction's "Pirandello, its Beckett and its Pinter"). Ursula K. Le Guin's anointment of Dick as "our own homegrown Borges" still adorns slick paperback editions of Dick's novels. Polish science fiction novelist Stanislaw Lem (*Solaris*), one of the few writers in the genre to be taken seriously by mainstream literary critics, considered Dick the only American science fiction writer who mattered, "a visionary among charlatans."

Gene Seymour is the film critic for Newsday.

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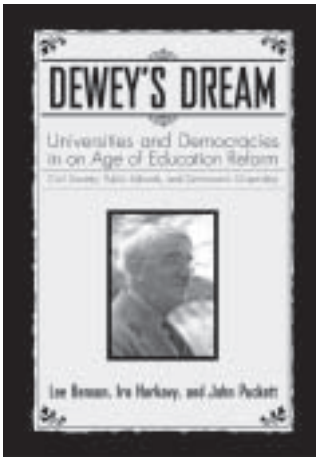

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Dick's cause has largely been carried into "mainstream fiction" by younger writers for whom genres aren't redlined literary precincts for corralling the rabble. Most notable among these true believers is Jonathan Lethem, who wrote such mood-inflected Dickian fantasias as *Girl in Landscape* before moving on to the street-level realism of *Motherless Brooklyn* and *The Fortress of Solitude*. Lethem's advocacy has reached its apotheosis with his editing of the Library of America's collection of four Dick novels from the 1960s: *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1965), *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968) and *Ubik* (1969). These were but a fragment of the thirty-plus novels and dozens of short stories Dick cranked out during his melancholy, tumultuous life. But they'll do nicely for a representative sample of the man at his most desperately ingenious.

COURTESY OF THE PHILIP K. DICK TRUST

Dick's death in 1982 at age 53 from heart failure (and the cumulative effect of several strokes) came just as his fame was poised to become wholly commensurate with his legend. *Blade Runner*, Ridley Scott's atmospheric, hard-boiled adaptation of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, came out later that year, the first in an ongoing stream of movies drawn from or inspired by Dick's twitching, wild-eyed literary corpus. (The movie's perpetually sodden skies and rococo grittiness helped set the mood for the "Cyberpunk" movement in science fiction writing that emerged in the mid-1980s.) The succeeding Dick movie adaptations have gone from 1990's *Total Recall* to this year's *Next*, with Stephen Spielberg's *Minority Report* (2002) and Richard Linklater's *A Scanner Darkly* (2006) more or less redeeming such relative underachievers as *Imposter* (2002) and *Paycheck* (2003). Most of these movies came from Dick's short stories, where, as with most fantasy stories, concept can trump or overpower content. (And Hollywood gorges on "high" concepts as if they were sausage biscuits at an all-you-can-eat breakfast buffet.) The Dickian trope of living in worlds that turn out to be, to borrow a title from a Dick biography, "only apparently real" has proved so compelling to contemporary audiences that a Dick-inspired movie like 1999's *The Matrix* became a pop-cultural phenomenon powerful enough to—almost—withstand two overblown sequels.

In his lifetime, Dick's renown didn't scrape the stars, but it did achieve a kind of semi-outlaw cult status nurtured by mid-1970s profiles in such magazines as *The New Yorker* and *Rolling Stone*. By that time, Dick's private life had collapsed into a welter of psychic trauma and physical hardship. His mental health had been fragile for decades. He'd been seized by visions; some of them spiritual in nature, some of them summoned by psychedelic drugs he'd taken even as he was abusing prescription amphetamines. The early 1970s were especially rough for Dick, who'd spent time in psychiatric clinics, attempted suicide (in 1972) and was in a heightened state of paranoia aggravated by a violent 1971 break-in at his Marin County home with windows and doors smashed, private papers stolen and file cabinets apparently blown up. Who did it? Could have been anyone, Dick believed, from the Feds to the Black Panthers to religious fanatics, maybe even himself in a delusional state. His red-zone paranoia swung in so many directions, had assumed such grotesque dimensions, that he wrote letters to the FBI (wait, didn't he think they were after him, too?) implicating those he thought were left-wing conspirators, including his advocate Lem. (The bureau, from the available evidence, did little with this information beyond sending Dick a thank-you note.) The Dick novel that may best sum up this period of his life is *A Scanner Darkly* (1977), whose protagonist is a narcotics agent who is, at best, only dimly aware that he's his own main quarry.

Dick's erratic behavior alienated many friends and supporters. But it also contributed to his legend as an artist who lived out his vision of modern life as an infinite warehouse of alternate, collapsible realities. As far as Dick is concerned, not only is nothing what it appears to be but even one's own capacity to perceive this notion is suspect—and constantly under siege.

When poring over the chronology of Dick's life story in the rear of the Library of America's omnibus, you wonder if you aren't reading yet another Philip K. Dick story about a highly sensitive and deeply disturbed man at the mercy of both otherworldly visions and unseen malevolent forces. He'd been writing such stories even before he'd dedicated himself fully to science fiction. His "realistic" novels—the earliest of which, *Voices From the Street*, was written sometime in the early 1950s but was published for the first time this year by the sci-fi imprint Tor—were grim psychological portraits of Eisenhower-era, petit-bourgeois, quasi-bohemian life in Dick's home terrain of Northern California. These books share with the science fiction novels the same heedless rush of colliding emotions and shifting points of view, the awkward, sideswiping sentences and a looming, unnameable dread making their jumpy characters more frantic and desperate. Lethem has elsewhere characterized these dry, often inscrutable novels as being "something like Richard Yates meets Charles Willeford." One also sees elements of John O'Hara, an undervalued but prevalent influence on post–

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World War II professional writers, in Dick's accumulation of raw detail, only with a more bent perspective on the middle-class struggle for social acceptance and financial solvency.

Science fiction jolted these mundane elements literally and figuratively into several dimensions of time and space. Some insist that Dick fell into the genre by default; the faster he could spin yarns about robots, spaceships and such, the easier money he could make compared with the lack of success he was having with conventional fiction. It's probably more accurate to say that Dick found his true voice by bringing the psychological edginess of his realist sensibility into the purely phantasmagorical. Pure conceptual invention, for its own sake, wouldn't be enough for Dick's kind of science fiction. His subconscious, having reached escape velocity toward new versions of heaven and hell, wouldn't allow it.

*

> "Suppose I want to construct my own universe," Leo said. "Maybe there's something evil in me, too, some aspect of my personality I don't know about. That would cause me to produce a thing even more ugly than what you've brought into being." At least with the Perky Pat layouts one was limited to what one had provided in advance, as Eldritch himself had pointed out. And—there was a certain safety in this.
>
> "Whatever it was could be abolished," the child said indifferently. "If you found you didn't like it. And if you did like it—" She shrugged. "Keep it, then. Why not? Who's hurt? You're alone in your—" Instantly, she broke off, clapping her hand to her mouth.
>
> "Alone," Leo said. "You mean each person goes to a different subjective world? It's not like the layouts, then, because everyone in the group who takes Can-D goes to the layout, the men to Walt, the women into Perky Pat. But that means you're not here." Or, he thought, I'm not here. But in that case—
>
> —*The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*

Try to keep up because, as I've suggested, this stuff tends to come at you in a rush. Leo is Leo Bulero, a wealthy industrialist with an overly developed frontal lobe. This does him next to no good in dealing with the threat posed by his eponymous rival, Palmer Eldritch, who's apparently developed some superhallucinogen called Chew-Z, which will

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Politics and Culture in Modern America
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make the aforementioned Can-D an obsolete means for Mars colonists to entertain themselves with virtual reality. (Walt and Perky Pat are dolls to help the fantasies along.) Leo may (or may not) be having a Chew-Z vision right now with the little girl being the mutilated, manipulative Eldritch in another form. Some have prophesied that Leo will kill Palmer. Only it may not be Palmer he kills but a virtual version of himself. But what if everything Leo's been going through is a Chew-Z mind-fuck?

Meanwhile, Barney Mayerson, a "precog" (as in precognitive, or psychic) formerly employed by Leo, has been "drafted" to leave Earth for Mars with his portable therapist, Dr. Smile, in tow. (Dr. Smile, by the way, is in a suitcase. Or maybe he *is* a suitcase. Dick wrote this stuff so fast that he later admitted even he couldn't understand *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, much less read it.) Mayerson knows he's in for a drab, colorless life on the Red Planet. But that may still be preferable to staying in New York, where it's always 180 degrees because of the greenhouse effect, though it isn't called that in the book…

A permanent climate crisis? People debilitating themselves with artificial distraction? All of it happening near the dawn of the twenty-first century? In *Ubik*, there's even something called a "'pape machine," which allows its user to consume only whatever news he or she wants to hear on any given day. It's easy, when encountering such details, to get too hung up on the prophetic aspects of science fiction in general and Philip K. Dick's in particular. Anyone who keeps pounding against the wall of plausibility as relentlessly as Dick is bound to conjure Stuff That Really Happens. (And, as four out of five misanthropes will testify, if you habitually expect the worst, people will swear you're clairvoyant.) But it's not the raw details of *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* you retain so much as the nightmarish swirl of imagery and the runaway outrageousness of its conceits.

And besides, any science fiction worth one's emotional investment is less concerned with predicting the future than with intensely re-imagining the present with all its attendant neuroses, pressures and yearnings. The odds are good that most of them will still be with us fifty to 100 years from now, with or without an ozone layer. So it's possible to read both *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* and *Ubik*, published four years later, as screwball improvisations on living in a wired-up, plugged-in and stressed-out-with-excess civilization such as the 1960s—or any decade thereafter. *Ubik* rattles and zooms along with the same wacky momentum, dense clutter and disorienting plot twists. This is another one of those books by Dick that you have to read almost as fast as he was making it up.

The Man in the High Castle came forth with almost as much speed as the other books. But you can tell Dick took his time with this somber, mordant tour of life in a United States more than two decades after it lost World War II to the Axis powers. The Nazis control the Eastern Seaboard, while the Japanese have all but colonized the Pacific Rim. Only the Rockies provide refuge for people like Hawthorne Abendsen, the reclusive author of a bestselling novel in which America defeated Germany and Japan. The book is so vivid that it can spook a baleful Reich enforcer: "How that man can write, he thought. Completely carried me away. Real. Fall of Berlin to the British, as vivid as if it had actually taken place. Brrr. He shivered. Amazing, the power of fiction, even cheap popular fiction, to evoke. No wonder it's banned within Reich territory; I'd ban it myself. Sorry I started it. But too late; must finish, now."

Dick used the *I Ching* to plot *High Castle*, and its characters likewise toss coins throughout the novel to assess the situations and decide what to do next. This would seem like a gimmick within a gimmick if it weren't for Dick's intense rendering of a plausibly ominous, emotionally arid alternative universe. He is just as vivid in evoking the tangled thought processes of characters who have aged within this nightmarish time frame, whether it's a Japanese businessman who fears his empire is next on the Nazi's to-do list or a judo instructor so moved by Abendsen's book that she risks her life to seek him out in his "high castle." Dick slips in the possibility that Abendsen's version of reality is more documentary than speculation and that it's everyone else who's trapped in their dark, contorted dream of real life. It is that impulsive daring, along with the aforementioned psychological intensity that, in my mind, elevates *The Man in the High Castle* above Philip Roth's more elegant experiment in alternative history, *The Plot Against America*. Not that such comparisons would matter to the book-chat crowd who think Roth soiled himself by venturing into fantasy motifs.

Dick's subsequent work only intermittently displayed *High Castle*'s narrative composure. *Martian Time-Slip* (1964), one of the best and most haunting of Dick's novels from the period covered in the Library of America omnibus, isn't included here, probably because *Three Stigmata* covers the Dickian motif of ennui on the Red Planet. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* displays both the relative calm of Dick's realist prose and the antic pace of his more extravagant fantasies. Those who know the story only through *Blade Runner* may be surprised to see how much of the original novel was omitted. The Rick Deckard who hunts down and kills rogue androids is less a Hammett-esque tough guy than a married-and-harried bill payer (Think Gene Wilder more than Harrison Ford) struggling to achieve a normal life after most of the world's been destroyed and most of what's left of humanity has emigrated "off-world."

Among those left behind to wander among the ruins is John Isidore, a "chickenhead" with only a few mechanized objects for comfort, trying to keep the "kipple" at bay—"kipple" being the accumulation of junk mail, used match covers and other clutter that seems to reproduce itself when no one's around. Isidore is not supposed to be mentally advanced enough to know how bad off he is, but in one of the most startlingly evocative passages Dick ever wrote, the void stares back at him:

> Silence. It flashed from the woodwork and the walls; it smote him with an awful, total power, as if generated by a vast mill. It rose from the floor, up out of the tattered gray wall-to-wall carpeting. It unleashed itself from the broken and semi-broken appliances in the kitchen, the dead machines which hadn't worked in all the time Isidore had lived here. From the useless pole lamp in the living room it oozed out, meshing with the empty and wordless descent of itself from the fly-specked ceiling. It managed in fact to emerge from every object within his range of vision as if it—the silence—meant to supplant all things tangible. Hence it assailed not only his ears but his eyes; as he stood by the inert TV set he experienced the silence as visible and, in its own way, alive. Alive! He had often felt its austere approach before; when it came to burst in without subtlety, evidently unable to wait. The silence of the world could not rein back its greed. Not any longer. Not when it had virtually won.

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There's little that's graceful about such writing, but it's likely that no one other than Dick could have pulled it off. As much as any paragraph in Dick's vast output could, this one encompasses the unholy dread, the exhaustive observation (both from within and without), the aggrieved sense of enveloping evil and, even if it's only a glimmer here, the sense that, in the face of overpowering emptiness and chaos, being human still somehow matters.

Dick was the great tragic-comedian of what we've come to know as "future shock," our collective inability to cope with the miracles and malevolence that come at us in new forms every day. He seemed even less capable than most of coping, and as the years passed, he would develop ever more elaborate spiritual and emotional rationales to go on living. But as fucked-up-and-full-of-it as he was, as intimidating as technological society could be, he knew that even the frailest among us deserve better than to be crushed by the world. If Hollywood doesn't quite get that part of him right, maybe the rest of us will someday. ■

Night on Earth

MICHAEL WOOD

AFTER DARK. By Haruki Murakami. Translated from the Japanese by Jay Rubin. Knopf. 190 pp. $22.95.

"All the stories you've been telling tonight," a character says to an unidentified speaker or speakers in Haruki Murakami's most recent collection of short fictions, *Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman* (2006), "seem to fall into two categories": "There's the type where you have the world of the living on one side, the world of death on the other, and some force that allows a crossing-over from one side to the other.... The second type involves paranormal phenomena or abilities, premonitions, the ability to predict the future. All of your stories belong to one of these two groups." Not our narrator's story, though, or rather not the story of his life so far. Until recently he had never seen a ghost or had a premonition, but the tale he now tells involves the sight of a second self that hates the first ("It was me, of course, but another me.... The one thing I did understand was that this other figure loathed me"), glimpsed in a mirror that turns out not to have existed in ordinary space-time. An implied prediction in an alternative world: He has stumbled into both categories at once.

Murakami is mocking and simplifying his own signature fictional devices, which often involve crossings between apparently incompatible worlds. In his remarkable novel *Dance Dance Dance* (1988), several characters slip through a crack in time into an older, hidden territory whose inhabitants cry the tears that are not cried in everyday life. "We shed tears for all the things you never let yourself shed tears," they say, "we weep for all the things you did not weep." In *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (1985), a character's unconscious life is extrapolated and simulated on a computer and then reinserted surgically, in the form of a virtual movie, into the man's brain. He lives half his life (and half the novel) inside this simulation. *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1997), the novel that catapulted Murakami from cult status to stardom—Christian Caryl tells us in a recent issue of *The New York Review of Books* that there is a cafe in Taipei named after Murakami as well as a bar in Moscow, and that his work has been translated into thirty-six languages—is littered with modes of transportation between worlds. And here perhaps the problem begins. It is the litter that Murakami is mocking in his story, but what is he to do about it? Is there an escape from gimmicks in doubling or twisting the gimmick? Yes, but you can't do that forever, and the mockery suggests something of an impasse as well as an alert faculty of self-criticism.

After Dark, Murakami's ninth novel, doesn't start well. "Eyes mark the shape of the city. Through the eyes of a high-flying night bird, we take in the scene from midair." No, this is not a metaphor for a plane arriving in Tokyo; it is a figure

Michael Wood is the Charles Barnwell Straut Professor of English at Princeton University. His most recent book is Literature and the Taste of Knowledge *(Cambridge).*

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for narrative point of view, later identified as that of "an imaginary camera." Murakami's "we" is that semi-retired functionary, the omniscient narrator, and we are more than a little hampered by our self-consciousness. As befits our job description, we do know everything ("This is the continuation of their earlier conversation," "This is the man who was photographed by the surveillance camera," "We are probably the only ones who know that"), but we are not allowed to interfere ("We know. But we are not qualified to become involved"; "We observe but we do not intervene").

The diligent awkwardness of the technique is obviously intentional, but does that help us? In the end I think the answer is yes, but there are still a few more doubts to overcome. About the writing, for example. Does Murakami's own prose actually contain lamentable sentences like "A pregnant silence reigned" or "You can feel her pain"? Or: "Shirakawa is lying on the floor, doing sit-ups"? Does the Japanese language allow sitting and lying at the same time? I can only ask, but I have to ask. The novel also has weary and obvious images of the city as an immense creature ("Countless arteries stretch to the ends of its elusive body"), of the legal system as a giant octopus, that do not seem to have been found in translation. However, just when you begin to fret over the lumpy technique and the creature-city imagery, a new tone emerges and the project that defines the book begins to take shape:

> We are inside a Denny's.... Unremarkable but adequate lighting: expressionless decor and chinaware; floor plan designed to the last detail by management engineers; innocuous background music at low volume; staff meticulously trained to deal with customers by the book.... After a quick survey of the interior, our eyes come to rest on a girl sitting by the front window.... She sits at a four-person table, reading a book. Hooded gray parka, blue jeans, yellow sneakers faded from repeated washing.... Her eyes rarely move from the pages of her book—a thick hardback. A bookstore wrapper hides the title from us.

This wouldn't be a Murakami novel if we didn't get to know exactly what that background music is. "The music playing at low volume is 'Go Away Little Girl' by Percy Faith and His Orchestra"—right sound, wrong song, possibly something of a slip-up by the management engineers. Later their scheme provides Burt Bacharach's "The April Fools," no doubt another piece of unintended commentary—unintended by the engineers, that is. However, "no one is listening," least of all the girl reading a book. And the narrator, we now realize, is not entirely omniscient, at this moment only omnivident, and maybe not even that, since he or we can't see through a book wrapper. In fact, the novel contains a whole series of discreet lapses from knowledge into vision, and from vision into guesswork: "His smile is meant to show he means no harm"; "Hovering around him there seems to be a drawn-out sense of resignation"; "Mari looks bored, but she is clearly listening." And we start to see what Murakami is doing, and how he is working his way out of his impasse. The more we see the less we know—or we find we know only that anomie is lurking everywhere.

Omniscience, Murakami suggests, is a fiction, not only a technique but a fantasy; it is just what we don't have, and what we probably couldn't bear. We wouldn't know what to do with the information, either in its quantity or in its reach of nasty surprises. Omniscience in this novel ironically launches the lesson that we cannot cross from world to world except by accident or miracle or breakdown, even when, or especially when, those worlds themselves are each of them real. "I started seeing it like this," a young jazz musician says in the most explicit statement of this theme, comparing his own relatively innocent life with that of clearly guilty and convicted criminals. "That there really was no such thing as a wall separating their world from mine. Or if there was such a wall, it was probably a flimsy one.... The second I leaned on it, I'd probably fall right through and end up on the other side. Or maybe it's that the other side has already managed to sneak its way inside of us, and we just haven't noticed." Similarly, the girl reading a book identifies closely with a battered Chinese prostitute she has helped: "We hardly talked at all, but I feel as if she's living inside me now. Like she's part of me." These sympathies are generous; but sympathies don't alter the world, and flimsy walls are still walls. The Chinese prostitute living inside the nice Japanese girl still has her hard, broken life to live in the actual world. "There was not," the uncertain hero says in Conrad's *Lord Jim*, a novel Murakami vividly evokes in *Hard-Boiled Wonderland*, "the thickness of a sheet of paper between the right and wrong of this affair." Marlow, the novel's narrator, usually kinder to Jim than this, asks, "How much more did you want?"

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After Dark is full of magical means of transition and/or doubling: a television set that functions as a window onto a virtual neighboring space; two mirrors that hold images after the person who had been standing in front of them has left; a pencil that drops from a table in one room to the floor in another. A man is physically transported into a different life, the dust of traversed walls still clinging to him. Even our narrator, suddenly worried about our otherwise disregarded material limitations, does a bit of teleporting. "It's not that difficult once we make up our mind. All we have to do is separate from the flesh, leave all substance behind, and allow ourselves to become a conceptual point of view devoid of mass. With that accomplished, we can pass through any wall, leap over any abyss." You can get there from here, all these gestures are saying to us, but only in the mind or in fiction.

And where is here, and where is there? *After Dark*, as we have seen, starts in a large city, later named as Tokyo, which is also a version of the abstract global metropolis, any place where you can find Denny's, 7-Eleven and organized crime. (Murakami's characters always live in some such zone.) The time is 11:56 PM. The novel takes us through the night, ending at 6:52 AM, each chapter a spot-check on a different, meticulously identified moment. The girl in the restaurant, Mari, is greeted by the jazz musician, Takahashi, who's on his way to practice. He says he knows her older sister, the beautiful Eri, and apparently he does. Eri, in another part of the city, is trying to sleep her life away and has been doing so for two months, waking only to go to the toilet and to eat what's necessary to keep herself alive. Later, Mari meets the Chinese prostitute who has been beaten, and later still we meet Shirakawa, the man who beat her in a fury after discovering she was having her period. We meet a member of the Chinese gang who employs the prostitute, and then we see Shirakawa back at his computer, restlessly attacking a stubborn business problem, avoiding his wife and family till the morning, when he can sleep while they wake. "He does not look like the kind of man who would buy a Chinese prostitute," our narrator tells us, "and certainly not one who would administer an unmerciful pounding to such a woman." But then what does such a man look like? This man doesn't seem even to have, or to be able to acknowledge, a memory of his behavior. His only memory, it seems, is in his hurting hand.

EVENTS

INTERNATIONAL

Dubrovnik, Croatia

■ "Transforming Culture: From Empire to Global Community." June 3–9, Dubrovnik, Croatia. Since the 2007 Praxis conference will be held in Europe, we will highlight some of the most advanced examples of cultural transformation and sustainability that are being practiced and developed in Europe today. From the Mondragon Cooperatives in Spain to alternative energy in Denmark, we will showcase projects that demonstrate seventh-generation, life-affirming values. The conference will feature outstanding thinkers and doers, practical workshops, networking, small-group cafe discussions and even vacation time in one of the world's most beautiful sites. Speakers include: Tom Hayden, Frances Moore Lappé, George Lakoff, Hazel Henderson, Thom Hartmann, Riane Eisler, David Korten, Johan Galtung, European members of Parliament and more. More information on our website: www.praxispeace.org (click on Dubrovnik Conference '07). Or call (707) 939-2973.

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■ Fortieth Anniversary Celebration August 3–5. Friday, 8 PM: reception; Saturday: conference and evening party; Sunday: TBD. Let's rededicate ourselves to ending the Iraq War while we remember, reconnect and celebrate the organization we have created and sustained. Register and get details at www.vvaw.org or (773) 276-4189.

NEW YORK

David Satcher MD, PhD

■ Wednesday, May 16, 7:30 PM. Physicians for a National Health Program NY Metro Chapter invites you to hear David Satcher MD, PhD, former US Surgeon General and current director of the Center of Excellence on Health Disparities at Morehouse School of Medicine, discuss "The Role of Health Care Reform in the Elimination of Health Care Disparities." Sixth-annual Joanne Lukomnik Forum. Weill Medical College of Cornell University, 1300 York Ave. at 69th St., New York City. Free. Reservations not required, but to assure a place send us your name. (212) 666-4001. Fax: (212) 866-5847. E-mail: pnhpnyc@igc.org.

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■ Storming the Heavens: Worker Education and Social Activism Commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the CUNY Centers for Worker Education. A conference for labor scholars, educators, trade unionists, current and former worker-students. June 1–2, 25 Broadway, New York City. Proposals are welcome for papers, presentations and panels exploring the history, politics and contemporary significance of Worker Education in the United States and abroad. Teachers, staff and students in worker-education programs are encouraged to contribute to the discourse reflecting their institutional and personal experiences and social impact. Labor scholars and trade unionists are especially encouraged to attendand/orparticipate.www.workereducation.org. (212) 966-4014.

Media and Youth Culture

■ Media: Overseas Conversations (IV). An International Conference in New York City, May 31–June 2: Distinguished international panelists will participate in open conversations on media literacy, media ecology and media studies. Screenings of youth-produced programs from around the world will exhibit the true power of the media. All programs are free of charge and open to the public. For full schedule and RSVP visit: www.mocnyb.org.

Heir to an Execution

■ The National Committee to Reopen the Rosenberg Case's annual memorial meeting Thursday, June 13, 6 PM. Tamiment Library, 70 Washington Square South, 10th floor. Screening of film *Heir to an Execution* plus Q&A with director (Rosenberg granddaughter) Ivy Meeropol. Music: Helene Williams, Julie Eigenberg, Edith Segal, Richard Corey, Leonard Lehrman. Donations welcome. (212) 998-2428.

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Where the novel becomes deeply mysterious is in the implied connection between Shirakawa and Eri, who at one point is transported in her sleep, bed and all, into a different reality. There is a pencil from his office lying in the room but no other sign of him now, although we have glimpsed what is perhaps a masked version of him here before. "This is reality," Eri thinks with careful logic. "For some reason, a different kind of reality has taken the place of my normal reality." Then she is beamed back to her own room. Is the other room the place where lost desires go, where a disoriented girl and a volatile man might almost meet despite themselves? What do her sleep and his violence have to do with the night and the rest of the characters in the book? They are images, I would suggest, of separation from the self, and they are the novel's strongest representations of the city's secrets: refusal and breakage. Their counter-images are Mari's concern for her sister, her feelings for the Chinese girl, Takahashi's thoughts about criminals and the wall, but they are just that: more images, not an argument or an action.

Our narrator has a theory of the night. It is "a place resembling a deep, inaccessible fissure." It opens "secret entries into darkness in the interval between midnight and the time the sky grows light." It is elsewhere, wherever elsewhere is: "someplace different: someplace outside your usual territory." This is all rather didactic, and fails to do justice to the edgy, dubious atmosphere the novel creates. Mari and Eri, Takahashi, Shirakawa, the flophouse manager and staff, the Chinese prostitute, the Chinese gangster, do not form a pattern of difference or a representative menagerie of the dark hours. They are just versions of ordinariness and its discontents, and they will not fade in the morning light, whatever Murakami's narrator wants to think. Their coexistence in the city suggests not a continuity between innocence and crime, or between middle-class loneliness and immigrant despair, but the radical separation of people linked by nothing more than a slender fictional plot. There is a fine figure for this separation in the multiple appearances of the Chinese gangster on his motorbike. He arrives at the flophouse to take the beaten girl away. Later he passes Mari and Takahashi on the street; and later still he stops at the same traffic light as the taxi Shirakawa is taking on his way home. No recognition occurs in either case. Why should it? None of these people have read the novel, and there is no other way for them, or anyone, to learn of their connection. ■

LETTERS
CONTINUED

(Continued From Page 2)

WELCOME TO THE 'COUNTRY' CLUB

Geneva, Switzerland

■ Having served twenty years with the UN, I found Perry Anderson's review of books on the UN ["Made in USA," April 2] particularly incisive but somewhat wanting on three points. First, while Kofi Annan deified his position, the UN Secretary General is nothing more than his job description in the UN Charter, namely the "chief administrative officer of the organization." Hence his function is to administer, a job Annan did singularly badly. Everything else is smoke, albeit smoke that sold well.

Second, writing that Ban Ki-moon's election "required Chinese assent" is disingenuous, as all Secretary Generals require Chinese assent, not to mention that of the other four permanent members of the Security Council.

Finally, the UN is a club. One member, the United States, pays about 23 percent of the dues. Three members—the United States, Germany and Japan—pay some 50 percent. Twelve members pay some 80 percent, which means that the remaining 180 members pay less than 1 percent each, on average. The UN will cease to be a tool of the West and a forum for the rest the day the costs are more evenly spread—an unlikely event that would probably make for an even worse UN. ALESSANDRO CASELLA

YES I SAID YES I WILL YES...

Philadelphia

■ Stephen Gillers's "Free the *Ulysses* Two" [Feb. 19] notes lawyer John Quinn's lack of enthusiasm in his defense of *Ulysses* as published in *The Little Review* in 1921. Quinn thought the case was hopeless. It is true that during the 1920s, the NY Society for the Suppression of Vice did begin to lose obscenity cases when a book's literary value was established. However, when it lost, as with the case Gillers mentions regarding Lawrence, Freud and Schnitzler, the Vice Society had a grand jury indict the publisher of those three authors on the same charges. After two and a half years of lost time and money, the publisher had to give up the fight.

Not only had Ezra Pound expurgated *Ulysses* passages before the "Ulysses Two" printed excerpts; the book was under special customs surveillance as subversive, probably because *The Little Review* had published anarchist writers. If Pound himself thought Joyce's frankness regarding defecation, masturbation and intercourse hopeless, it is no wonder *Ulysses* was not the right book to challenge the era's moral entrepreneurs. It took the genius, and connections, of Morris Ernst to de-censor *Ulysses*, in 1934. The influence of the father-in-law of Joyce's son, the wealthy stockbroker Robert Kastor, in preparing the way for this event is an imponderable. JAY A. GERTZMAN, *author*
Bookleggers and Smuthounds:
The Trade in Erotica, 1920–1940

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PUZZLE NO. 3083

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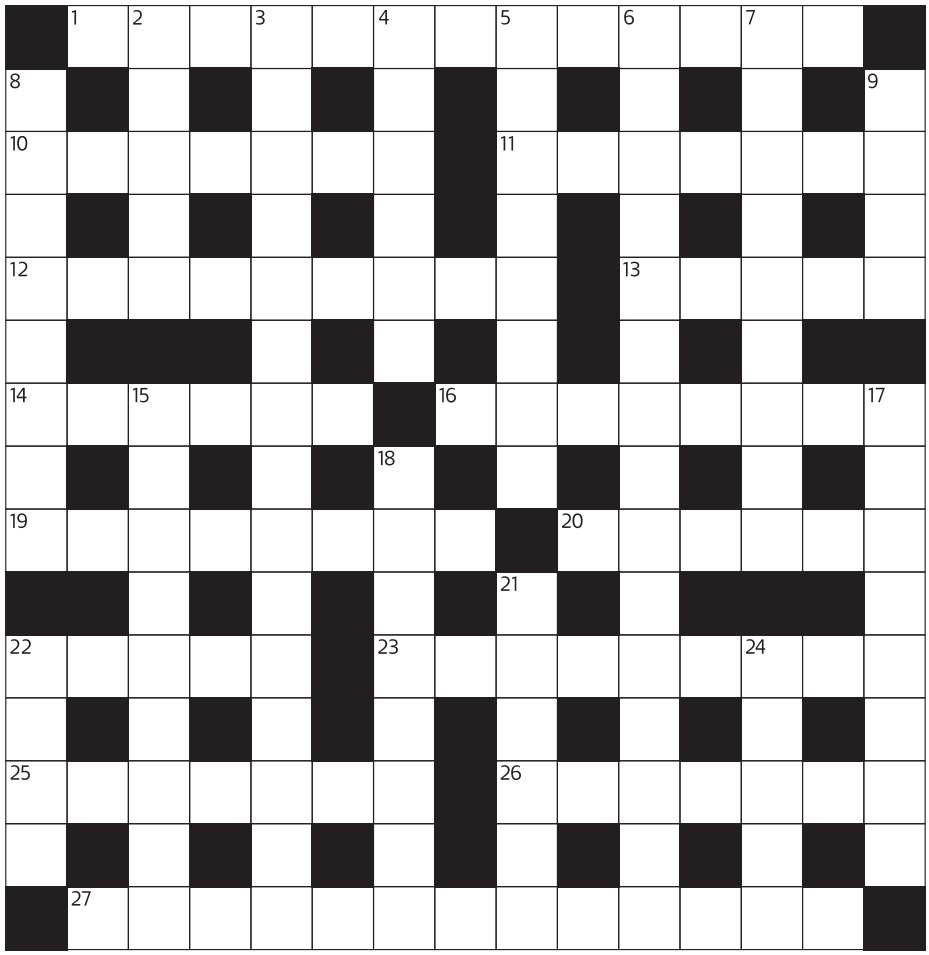

ACROSS

1 Where one might buy snacks—and possibly lied, Tom having confused senses this way. (13)

10 Try to get mixed up with a broken line, having no inherent motion. (7)

11 Possession of land as one's own makes the end seem a bit of a problem. (7)

12 The one who did in Moby-Dick? (9)

13 How to make an actual thousand in the country. (5)

14 Puts one's foot down on 16 before they are sent out… (6)

16 …with a nasty confusion, which takes a long time. (8)

19 With a "come on" attitude? (Possibly the net result with what goes on the cake.) (8)

20 Hie yourself hence to fix things up! (6)

22 Scientist found with a grand in a bad fire. (5)

23 They should have been made of sterner stuff, according to the speaker at a burial. (9)

25 Proving part of the set might be real dogs! (7)

26 Bring me back with a couple, as they once said, and get a hug! (7)

27 Sunstroke on your head takes a large number a little way to cite backwards the answer, showing little feeling for it. (13)

DOWN

2 An Arab chief might be found here, like me, erroneously displaying it. (5)

3 Certainly not an outward way of looking at things. (15)

4 No particular person, but obviously a New York single type. (6)

5 The person who gets the document you sign starts with the last part, and an alternative to look at. (8)

6 Look at the Russian space station inside—what some investors buy has a series of numbers, which is only partly proper. (15)

7 On getting up, you have the last sort, with the soldier getting a feeling of homesickness, perhaps. (9)

8 Act like a proper tourist, when what the sad type sometimes heave gets set incorrectly, to a point. (8)

9 and **17** What the dressmaker may fear is too much pressure put on her joining—just like a lot of dressmakers. (12)

15 One hears 22 down had this time to be a bit lazy. (9)

17 See 9

18 A wild snake gets to sort of eat and quietly creeps on you thus. (6,2)

21 Some thing to take exception to? (6)

22 Seek favor by servile demeanor, dear, I hear. (4)

24 It's all right to have a relationship with such a cute animal! (5)

PUZZLED? No more cross words. If you don't see why "Lures" are "Ground Rules" send for those of Mr. Lewis to: Puzzled, The Nation, 33 Irving Place, New York, NY 10003, or access our website at www.thenation.com/about/crossword.mhtml.

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E	■	R	■	R	■	D	■	M	■	O	■	N	■	E
E	M	I	R	A	T	E	■	E	P	I	S	O	D	E
D	■	G	■	C	■	C	■	N	■	C	■	C	■	D
B	L	A	C	K	■	A	N	D	■	E	M	C	E	E
A	■	M	■	■	■	D	■	■	■	■	■	H	■	D
C	L	I	F	F	■	E	P	I	D	E	M	I	C	■
K	■	■	■	O	■	N	■	N	■	G	■	■	■	I
■	A	P	E	R	I	T	I	F	■	O	F	T	E	N
P	■	U	■	■	■	■	■	I	■	■	■	H	■	H
S	E	T	U	P	■	C	A	D	■	W	H	I	T	E
Y	■	D	■	O	■	O	■	E	■	A	■	M	■	R
C	R	O	S	I	E	R	■	L	E	G	I	B	L	E
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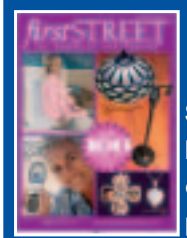

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